FETTERLESS,

Though Bound Together.

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THOUGH BOUND TOGETHER.

BY

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THREE VOLUMES.

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TO MY GOOD BROTHER

THESE VOLUMES ARE INSCRIBED WITH BEST LOVE BY

THE AUTHOR.

January, 1879.

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"TRUST ME."

CHAPTER I.

NORA.

"NORA is writing love-letters, as usual, so of course she won't come," said Josephine Winton, Nora's eldest sister, somewhat impatiently.

She tapped her shining boot with her riding-whip as she spoke, and glanced towards the stables, whence the saddle-horses were at this moment being led forth, dancing as they approached.

"Madcap is a perfect beauty," said

Aubrey, the only brother of Josephine and Nora. "I don't wonder a girl can write love-letters to a man who gives her such an animal as that for a birthday present."

"It's just like Nora's luck," replied Josephine. "I always said that she was born with a golden spoon in her mouth, whereas yours and mine seem to be made of pewter, and are but very sparsely plated."

Josephine's look and tone as she made these remarks were certainly not *sisterly*.

"Here's Nora, fortunately without *any* spoon at present," cried Aubrey, laughing boisterously at his own joke. Nora had just crossed the tesselated pavement of the entrance-hall, and now stepped out upon the terrace, where her brother and sister stood waiting.

The horses on the gravel below were champing their bits, pawing the

and in a dozen other equine ways manifesting their impatience to be starting.

"Madcap, my darling," whispered Nora, approaching the mare, and handing her the sugar, for which that intelligent animal was asking by looks and signs, and all but words, indeed.

Madcap certainly was "a beauty," as Aubrey had stated. She was almost thoroughbred, her limbs shapely, her head small and perfectly formed, from the round transparent nostrils up to the pointed velvety ears. Nora declared the mare's eyes were "eloquent." They were certainly full and lustrous, and utterly without that restlessness which, to connoisseurs, at once suggests "vice." Her colour was chestnut, her manners sprightly, but her conduct eminently satisfactory. Her own mistress could certainly at all times have managed

her with a silken thread, as Gates, the head groom, was wont to declare. And Gates was no mean judge of horseflesh, and of riding too.

"When you have quite done feeding your mare, Nora," suggested Josephine, her hand on the pommel of her saddle, her foot in her brother's hand, "we should be glad to start."

"I am ready," cried Nora, who had mounted without assistance, a feat she had taught herself while staying in Dashshire, where equestrian accomplishments of all kinds are much in vogue.

Nora looked "such a little thing" as she stood on the ground, her neat figure showing to special advantage in its close-fitting dark blue habit; but once she was up in the saddle, the impression of "littleness" was forgotten, in admiration for the graceful ease

with which she sat and managed the playfully curvetting mare.

Madcap had been presented to her mistress on that little lady's birthday, nearly a year since.

Nora's betrothed husband, Mr. Alan Gwynne, had selected this present for his "bonnie wee lassie," as he loved to call Nora. He knew her love for horses, and her prowess in the saddle, and was proud that she possessed an accomplishment he so greatly admired.

Indeed it would have been hard to say what grace or accomplishment Nora lacked, in the eyes of her future husband at least, who certainly looked upon her as a pearl among women, and blessed the hour in which, after much persuasion and more hesitation, she had finally promised to be his wife, some day.

Nora was very thoughtful for her years, and had aspirations which carried her outside the usual desires of young ladies. To marry a wealthy husband was not the chief ambition of Nora's life, and when Mr. Alan Gwynne, the last representative of a wealthy and distinguished county family, offered his hand and heart to Nora, the girl hesitated, and took a long time to consider, before she could be induced to bind herself by any promise.

She was a thoughtful girl, fully aware of her own youth and inexperience, and had painfully realised that there had been nothing in her bringing up that would teach her to be a good and useful wife to any man; least of all, to so sedate and important a personage as Alan Gwynne, Esq., of Gwynne Castle, Dashshire, J. P., and Deputy-Lieutenant for the county.

Had Nora yielded herself more readily to her aunt Isabel's influence, that admirable chaperon would no doubt have qualified her niece to pass muster in "*the highest society in the land.*"

This was a favourite speech of Mrs. Isabel Crawford's, a widow lady of fashionable aspirations, and the eldest sister of Mr. Winton, at the head of whose country establishment Mrs. Crawford settled herself on the death of her delicate young sister-in-law, who lost her own life in giving birth to Aubrey, her only son, and the long-desired heir to the paternal name and estate.

With aunt Isabel's advent in her brother's home, a reign of terror commenced there, and under her arbitrary rule the nursery and the servants' hall were suddenly taught

in practical lessons what *Despotism* meant.

The late mistress of Winton Hall had been gentle, sweet-tempered, delicate, and yielding. And the rigorous dominion of Mrs. Crawford, therefore, appeared the more appalling by reason of its stern contrast.

This iron rule, however, seemed to answer admirably among the domestics, who became wondrously alert, and served Mrs. Crawford with more nimble hands and feet, though, perhaps, with a less willing spirit than they had evinced towards their late mistress.

In the nursery, however, unexpected difficulties presented themselves.

Josephine, who was already eleven years old, vehemently protested against the self-assumed authority of her aunt Isabel, fought, stamped, and kicked against all rule as represented by Mrs. Crawford, and, as

far as she was able, induced her little sister Nora also to rebel against the tyranny of "Aunt Iz," as the refractory children soon came to call the relative they so unreasonably, perhaps, but none the less vehemently, objected to.

CHAPTER II.

THE INTERNAL ECONOMY OF WINTON HALL.

Mr. Winton, the widower, was quite content to abandon the reins of his feeble home-rule to the firm, clever hands of his strong-minded sister. She seldom asked him for money, never unnecessarily; and she so contrived for his personal comfort, and that of the few guests he chose to make welcome at the Hall, that all that was required for them or himself was always to be had for the mere asking, since Mrs. Crawford took care to provide for emergencies on all occasions.

As for his children, Mr. Winton thought

little and cared less about them. He was well satisfied to thrust that responsibility on to his sister's powerful shoulders, with all the others of which he so thankfully freed himself.

Aubrey, the baby and the heir, was a very lovely, delicate little fellow, with golden curls that fell over his shoulders, a fair skin, and a little slender figure. Aunt Isabel's only weakness, or shall we say tenderness? was for this pretty lad, who was not long in finding out the power of his coaxing ways and fascinating looks, and profited considerably by both.

As for his daughters, Mr. Winton knew that as they existed they must be provided for, and—tolerated; an undeniable necessity, but "a great bore."

Nora, who was modest and retiring, but always cheerful and pleasant to look upon,

occasionally obtained a nod or a kind word from her father, but Josephine, who was noisy, self-asserting, and decidedly unfeminine in look and manner, vainly strove to get an approving smile from her father in response to the defiant glances she gave him with those bold black eyes of hers.

Josephine had verified the evil anticipations of both her aunt and her father, who, in talking the girls over, soon after her *début* at a county ball, had agreed that men would think a long time before they asked the elder to preside over their household gods. Josephine had already and most reluctantly crossed that stony bridge, called 30, arriving on the further side of which, young ladies are apt to find themselves dubbed "old maids."

Nora, meanwhile, had gone on a visit to

a former schoolfriend of hers in Dashshire, and, while staying with Maud Gwynne, had become acquainted with Mr. Gwynne, who was Maud's uncle and guardian. Of the result of that introduction the reader is aware.

"When is Miss Gwynne coming, Nora?" inquired Aubrey, having pulled up sharply after a lively canter, of which the natural rivalry between his thoroughbred and Nora's Madcap had made quite a race.

"How ridiculous you two are, galloping off at that pace," said Josephine, rejoining the others, and breathless herself.

"More ridiculous of you, Jo, not to keep up with us," said Aubrey, laughing.

"I prefer to reserve my 'trials of speed' for the hunting field," said Josephine; "and would advise you both to do the same, since we are soon to have such distinguished riders here as Miss and Mr. Gwynne.

"When are they coming really, Nora; is it settled yet?" asked Aubrey again.

"I mentioned the beginning of next week in my letter to-day," said Nora; and very bright and lovely she looked as she spoke, the rapid exercise, and the allusion to her love-letter, combining to send a rush of warm colour into her fair face.

"Father and aunt and I talked it all over in the library just after luncheon," continued Nora; "and if Maud settles to come on Monday or Tuesday, we are to have the dance on the following Friday."

"You seem to manage aunt and father too, just as you please, in these days, Miss Nora," said Josephine, who bitterly resented the fact that Nora, having secured a "desirable *parti*" for herself, should consequently have been promoted to the place of the one most entitled to consideration in the home circle.

"I tried hard to get the dance settled, for your sake, dear Jo," said Nora apologetically. "I thought you would be sure to enjoy a party of that sort much better than a stiff dinner, to which only the county magnates would be invited.

"Don't apologise, Nora dear," said Aubrey, "we shall every one of us be glad of a livelier entertainment than a 'fogey-spread,' and if we can get a couple of officers over from Churton, Jo will be in her glory, of course."

"You must undertake to get some men from town as well, Aubrey," said Josephine decisively.

"Who'll consent to come to this outlandish place, out of the hunting season, do you suppose?" queried Aubrey deprecatingly.

"Oh! those two fellows from the F. O.

will jump at the invitation, if they know they can keep billiards and 'unlimited' going day and night."

"The only difficulty," she added, after a reflective pause, "will be to keep our 'gambles' dark. It wouldn't answer at all for any of the fellows to 'blow the gaff' on our little odd tricks."

"No, by Jove! what a wax the guv. would be in," cried Aubrey, alarmed at his own suggestion.

"I'd rather the guv. caught us than the old Jezebel," laughed Josephine, meaning her aunt.

"I'm sure Alan Gwynne would not approve of betting and gambling, and low games of that sort," interposed Nora, in evident trepidation.

"Good Lor, hark at our infant!" exclaimed Josephine, with a rude burst of

laughter. "She actually dares to call billiards and *gambolling*, low! And so Mr. Alan Gwynne is a prig, is he, Miss Nora? Ah! that accounts for his selecting *you* as a partner for life."

Nora, accustomed to her sister's jibes and sneers, made no reply, but her heart seemed to grow heavier and heavier at each word she heard spoken.

Never before had the fast and slangy style of conversation her sister and brother habitually indulged in, so jarred upon her sensitive ear as now, when the anticipated arrival of certain dear friends of hers filled her with the most anxious forebodings as to the impressson her relatives were likely to make on Maud and Alan Gwynne.

These two were refined and highly cultured individuals, in whose charming society Nora had found the greatest delight.

As she thought of their gentle words and ways, Josephine and Aubrey seemed by contrast to vie with one another in vulgarity of speech and demeanour. In the congenial society of the Gwynnes, Nora had utterly forgotten the existence of such terrible aggravations as she constantly suffered at home, when she listened to the coarse stable slang which was Josephine's pet perversion of the English language.

Having failed to secure a husband for herself, "Jo" had determined to emulate the manners and customs of the sex she so much envied, as far as she possibly could, and never lost an opportunity of smoking, betting, gambling, or "going the pace," backing herself to beat the men either in the saddle or at the billiard table. Her attitude as she now sat, one elbow square and pointed, the other hand resting on her

horse's back, appeared to Nora as utterly devoid of feminine grace, and much more suitable to a dragoon desirous to "show off," than to a lady resting after a canter.

Vexed with herself for these "odious comparisons," Nora wondered where her sense of the fitness of things had been during all the years she had lived with Jo, without perceiving those blemishes of which she was now so keenly sensible.

"Where on earth we're to get horses enough from to mount such a party as we shall have at the Hall I'm sure I can't tell," said Aubrey, deprecatingly. "As you seem to be having it all your own way with the governor just now, Miss Nora, you had better broach that subject to him at once. It will be a question of ready money, you know, for the horses must be had over

from Churton, and unless Hoof and Golong get some coin with the order there'll be no mounts for our visitors, and they'll be bored to death if we can't ride."

"Captain Blythe and Mr. Nevers will send their own horses," said Nora, full of painful forebodings at the bare possibility of things not going smoothly when Maud and Alan should have arrived. "Then there is Black Knight for yourself, Aubrey, so you can lend the Duke to one of your friends from town," she continued, hoping to adjust matters comfortably without having to attack her father's purse strings, the slightest interference with which always caused much trouble to Mr. Winton and the aggressor.

"Mr. Gwynne brings his own stud with him, of course?" inquired Josephine, with a sarcastic smile.

"He will certainly send a groom and three horses," said Nora.

"Might as well make it half-a-dozen while he is about it," remarked Aubrey, with a shrill whistle of derision.

"Yes, that would suit the governor to a T," said Josephine; "he'll like to keep other people's horses as well as their servants! Miss Gwynne will have her maid, and Mr. Gwynne his valet, and then there'll be this congregation of grooms and helpers in the stables."

"But that is the way people always entertain in the country," suggested Nora meekly.

"Well, as we certainly have no experience of what people do in *town*," replied Josephine, with a toss of her head; "we might be expected to understand something of country fashions, but it has never oc-

curred to father hitherto to offer bed and board to more than two persons at a time at the Hall, and those who wanted to bring horses and servants have quartered them in the village."

"I know all that, dear Jo," said poor Nora, giving Madcap a slight cut with her whip to send her on at a more pace, which Nora felt would be far more congenial to her own excited feelings. "I know that, Jo, but things are different this time, and these guests must be suitably entertained and provided for."

"Oh! they must, must they?" said Josephine, on whose face displeasure was plainly visible. "And may I inquire whence the necessity arises, Miss Nora? Is it because you are *engaged*, and have been visiting about at swell's country houses, and having your head turned by flattery and

compliments, that our entire manner of life is to be changed?"

"Dear Jo, don't be cross," said Nora, with so tenderly appealing a look at her irate sister, that she, who though somewhat hardened was not without feeling, relented, and answered with almost a smile,

"I won't be heard on you, Nora. I have suffered enough from the horrid stinginess and severity of father and aunt Iz myself, to be able to pity you, and to understand the fear you must be in lest your friends also should be made uncomfortable during their visit to our *hospitable* home."

"You're a brick, Jo," cried Aubrey, "and it's the least we can do for poor little Nora to help her make things pleasant for these nobs. None but she would ever have got such grandees to accept an invitation to this dull old place of ours."

This remark, which sounded depreciatory of Josephine's powers, might have provoked another aggressive retort from that quick-tempered young lady; but Nora, thoroughly acquainted with her sister's peculiarities, knew how to manage her rising wrath, and at once endeavoured to do so.

"Let us do all we can to make our first ball a success, Jo dear," said Nora, with a fine instinct of diplomacy. "You are known as the best waltzer this side of Churton, and your fame alone will secure the officers of the 200th. Then, as eldest daughter of the house, you will be regarded as hostess, of course, and can select your partners to your liking, since every one of them must consider himself in duty bound to try and get a dance with Miss Winton."

"If any partners worth accepting *do* turn up," said Josephine, sceptically, "we may

manage to have a jolly evening." She was mollified, however, and gave her sister a nod of encouragement as she proposed "a brisk trot."

"Try and keep abreast," cried Aubrey, "and make our horses hold their heads well in line. One, two, three, and—away!"

It was a fairly good start, and the girls had striven to please their brother by managing to keep their horses' noses on a level.

Josephine's long-legged bay, "Sultan," was a hunter, and not a hack, by profession. He took small pleasure in trotting, and resented the curb with which his mistress always, and somewhat severely, managed him; but Madcap, who was always treated leniently by gentle Nora, finding that a steady trot was required of her, gave up all her capricious jumps, and twists, and twirls,

and settled down as placidly to the mechanical action her mistress desired, as though she had been a well-trained roadster instead of a sprightly lady's pet, whose beautiful movements ere this attracted universal admiration in the Ladies' Mile.

It was there Mr. Gwynne had first seen her during the previous season, and then and there resolved to purchase her for Nora if money could buy her.

The riders had now turned into the avenue which led up to the gates of Winton Hall, and a pretty and animated picture they made as they allowed their horses to walk leisurely home after that last brisk trot.

Josephine, strong, masculine, bold, and dark, was riding between her sister and brother, who seemed both cast in a far more delicate mould than herself.

She was a tall, large-boned girl, resembling her father and his sister in figure and looks, whereas Nora and Aubrey both had inherited the gentler graces of form and face which had distinguished their fair young mother.

"The gates are open—there must be some visitors up at the house," cried Aubrey, as he discovered that startling fact.

Startling indeed, for a visitor was a *rara avis* at the Hall, where neither welcome nor entertainment was ever forthcoming for strangers or friends.

CHAPTER III.

"JUNO," THE HEIRESS.

THE riding party had scarcely turned the corner of the narrowing path which led from the avenue to the front of the house, when a graceful girl, stepping from the open window of the drawing room, sped across the verandah and down the steps that led her to the gravel walk on which the horses were now brought to a sudden halt.

"Why, its Maud!" cried Nora in unfeigned delight, and tossing the reins to the attendant groom, she lightly sprang from the saddle.

In another moment she had flung her arms around her visitor's neck.

Both Josephine and Aubrey were too much surprised by the sudden apparition of Miss Maud Gwynne to find any suitable words of greeting.

By way of approaching the guest on something like a level, they in their turn dismounted; and Nora, flushed and incoherent in her sudden joy, duly presented her sister and brother to Miss Gwynne. Maud's eyes turned eagerly from Miss Josephine, but seemed to rest with considerable complacency upon the handsome scion of the house of Winton.

He returned the lady's scrutinizing glance with interest.

At this no beholder could have been surprised, for Maud Gwynne was a distinguished-looking, a remarkably handsome girl.

Her uncle, and guardian, who was fond and proud of her, had erstwhile called her "Juno," and so well did that name suit the classical features and dignified deportment of "the heiress," that all her friends with one accord so styled her ever after.

Aubrey Winton, whose experiences hitherto had been very limited in every direction, hearing that Miss Gwynne was an heiress, at once concluded that she must be unattractive in all other respects.

He was an impecunious youth always wanting money, seldom able to obtain any sum worth the name from his father, and consequently eager and ever on the alert for any chance which might bring some increase to his very limited allowance.

So, when Miss Gwynne *the heiress* was talked about at the Hall, and her visit there impending, Aubrey chivalrously resolved

to "make the best of the girl" whenever she should arrive, and, if he did not find her "quite too atrocious," to offer his hand and heart in exchange for her well-assured fortune.

Great was Mr. Aubrey's amazement when his sister introduced him to queenly Juno, with the lustrous eyes and the proudly-carried head, and informed him that this was her "very dear friend Maud."

Even Josephine's bold black eyes fell in involuntary bashfulness before the calmly penetrating glance of this august stranger; and Nora, keenly alive to the evident surprise created by the distinguished appearance of her much loved and admirable friend, watched the three in silence, as they stood eyeing one another and by their questioning glances involuntarily betrayed the keen interest which inspired them all.

Suddenly Nora's attentive eyes met those of her "dear Juno," whose pleased smile recalled the former to the surprise of the present situation.

"You seem to have fallen from the clouds, Maud!" she cried, seizing her friend's hands again and pressing them fondly to her lips.

"Do tell me what happy chance has brought you here so soon?"

Then, suddenly checking her impatience as a gloomy thought appalled her, she cried in a frightened voice and with a paling face—

"But, Alan?—is anything wrong with him?"

Maud's ready smile reassured her.

"Nothing, dearest, but symptoms of scarlet fever declared themselves in the nursery at home this morning, so Mrs. Elmore telegraphed to Guardie, to ask him what

had better be done with me. Two hours later, he drove up, and settled that I should come here at once, before there was the slightest risk of infection. Then Guardie took Spence and me to the station, and telegraphed to Mr. Winton, who received the message just after you had started for your ride—and *me voilà* ! "

"Oh! how I wish I had been at home to bid you welcome, dear, which you know I do with all my heart."

"I hope Miss Gwynne will allow me to take some small share in Nora's professions of hospitality," remarked Josephine, with a sincere if not a successful desire to prove her amiable inclinations towards the visitor.

Nora, quite aware of the effort Josephine was making, felt really grateful to her sister as she said,

"Maud knows you and Aubrey so well,

Jo, from all my chat about you both, that I am sure she is quite aware of all your kind intentions to her."

"Indeed, yes," said Maud eagerly.

She was sufficiently quick-sighted to be aware of some difficult under-current below the pleasant surface-talk of the sisters, but she was also sufficiently experienced to conceal such surmise.

"I even felt as though any formal introduction between us three," and she bowed her stately head to Nora's brother and sister, "was quite superfluous." She smiled as she spoke. "For I have heard so much about you," she added, "that I feel you are 'familiar friends' to me already."

"I trust Nora gave us good characters in making up her report," suggested Aubrey anxiously.

He was still somewhat nervous in the

society of any ladies save that of his sisters, and he had not quite recovered his amazement at beholding in this majestic and fascinating girl, the heiress whom he had resolved to "make the best of" if she were not "quite too atrocious."

Maud, true to herself, calm and Juno-like as ever, was quite unembarrassed. She had realized from the days of her early childhood that she was a very important personage, and her later years had further impressed that fact upon her. She was fully aware that a handsome and fascinating heiress may expect universal adulation, and she had as yet never been disappointed in such anticipations.

Though calmly conscious of her natural advantages, Miss Gwynne was neither self-asserting nor conceited. The important facts of her beauty, her accomplishments and

her wealth were indisputable, and the sense of her superiority lent her a certain prestige which she appreciated but never abused.

Her path through life was cast in very pleasant places; this she was thankful for, and enjoyed accordingly. Homage, attentions, and flattery she had always received, and latterly accepted more and more as her due. As a natural consequence, her position among her friends and acquaintances became a somewhat isolated one, for there can be but scant fellowship between a queen and her acknowledged courtiers.

* * * *

To this imperious young beauty the gentle companionship of Nora Winton came soothingly, with all the special attractiveness of perfect novelty, so desirable an attribute in the roving eyes of youth.

Nora's humble admiration for the queenly

Maud was from the first as intense as her affection became after some years of intimate and familiar intercourse.

The girls had first met at school, and twice since, their happy holidays had been passed together.

Once with an aunt of Miss Gwynne's at the sea-side, and more lately in Dashshire with Mrs. Elmore, a distant relation of Mr. Gwynne's, who selected her house as a suitable home for his ward for several reasons, the chief of which may be assumed to have been that of Mrs. Elmore's vicinity to Gwynne Castle. For Alan Gwynne determined to watch over Maud, since he had once undertaken the responsibility of guardian to his orphan niece, who, by an odd freak of nature, was really but a few years younger than her uncle. His thoughtful manners, however, gave him the appearance of sedate

manhood, much as Juno's natural dignity invested her with an air of maturity which is seldom seen in an unmarried girl.

To Alan Gwynne and his niece, small, modest, child-like Nora really did appear as "a dear little thing," and they vied in their desire to prove their affection for her by such tender coaxing and petting as mostly falls to the happy lot of a favourite child.

Hitherto that enviable *rôle* had only been played by Aubrey, in the Winton household, and poor Nora had been very much neglected as far as affection or gentle attentions went.

No wonder the poor child felt enthusiastically grateful to her glorious protectress, Juno-like Maud, for that imperious young lady's gracious condescension in allowing herself to be beloved.

No wonder that Nora's affectionate dis-

position basked delightedly in the warming rays of Juno's growing attachment to her "little friend." The natural consequence of this friendship between the girls was their joint admiration for Mr. Alan Gwynne, the Admirable Crichton of Maud's school-days, the kindly hero on whose charming qualities of mind and person she had dilated more and more, as her affection for little Nora taught her to unbend and become confidential.

On one memorable occasion, during the first week of those holidays spent in Dashshire, and very soon after Nora had become generally acquainted with her friend's 'Hero' and guardian, the girls were sitting chatting together over the supposed attractions of a certain young country squire, whose position and prospects rendered him a probable suitor for the hand of Miss Gwynne,—a supposi-

'tion supported by his own persistent attentions to the heiress.

"I shall never marry at all, I verily believe," Juno had declared in answer to her little friend's pleading on behalf of the much-snubbed squire.

"But you would make such a glorious bride, Maud," Nora timidly and somewhat irrelevantly suggested.

"And where will you find me a glorious bridegroom, Miss Nora?" her friend said with a toss of her handsome head.

"If you could find some new friend as kind and as handsome and as delightful as Mr. Gwynne?" began Nora, and flushed as she spoke.

"Ah! if," cried Maud impatiently. "But where can one find such another as Guardie? He *is* my beau-ideal of what a man should be; and as I measure all the Tony Lumpkins

about here by his standard, you may imagine what miserable clodhoppers they appear to me."

That afternoon the aspiring squire presented himself officially as a suitor for Miss Gwynne's hand, and, poor fellow! found himself dismissed with an amount of hauteur that made him realize, for the first time in his uneventful career, that he was not quite the conquering hero he had, until this mortifying hour of utter defeat, fondly chosen to consider himself.

* * * *

Perhaps it was the subsequent discussion of this provincial aspirant to Juno's hand, which brought the thoughts of love and marriage so prominently before the girls' attention at this time.

It certainly caused Maud to think very seriously on matrimonial subjects, not as

regarded herself, but in respect to the two beings whose affection made the welcome moral sunshine of her somewhat isolated existence.

With Maud, to decide was to act, and having come to the well-considered conclusion that her dear little Nora was the very wife most calculated to secure her youthful uncle's happiness, the impulsive girl lost no time in beginning to lay the train for that swiftly growing mutual attachment between these two most valued friends of hers, which culminated in a definite betrothal, far sooner than Maud herself had ventured to anticipate.

CHAPTER IV.

NORA'S FORTUNE.

By the time Mr. Alan Gwynne made his appearance at Winton Hall, his niece and her new friends had settled down into a very amiable family party.

Even aunt Iz was inclined to be gracious, and smiled with considerable complacency on a certain handsome young couple, the sight of whose constant companionship gladdened such tough semblance of heart as time and an impecunious and worrying brother had left her.

Her one tenderness, and certainly her only weakness, was the admiring affection

she lavished upon her brother's only son—that handsome thriftless Aubrey whom Juno, in her whispered confidences with Nora, had nick-named "Adonis," by reason of his marked resemblance to a certain classical head, the photograph of which adorned Miss Gwynne's album.

If a marriage could be brought about between Aubrey and the heiress, both anxious aunt Isabel and her usually indifferent brother felt that far brighter times were in store for Winton Hall, and its now somewhat despondent inhabitants, than had been experienced there since the days of the late owner, Aubrey's rollicking grandfather, who had squandered away his fortune and his pospects, and left his only son, the present owner, but a very scant inheritance.

How thoroughly young Aubrey admired "Juno" must have been evident to the most

casual observer, but the less obvious point, and decidedly the more important one, was that of reciprocity.

Miss Gwynne from her superior position as the woman and the older of these two, looked down upon Aubrey with a certain kindly toleration, which surely was very far removed from the adoring manifestations usually accepted as the recognised signs of love.

The proud beauty's bearing towards her dear Nora's handsome young brother closely resembled the expression of gentle tenderness with which little Nora herself was habitually treated by her imperious friend.

And aunt Isabel anxiously watching "the signs of the times," and duly reporting upon them to her misanthropical brother, was often disheartened by the easy gaiety of Maud's manner towards young Aubrey, and

the persistent and laughing good-nature with which she turned all his stammering attempts at sentiment into ridicule.

This mode of procedure was utterly alien to any ever reported in the chronicles of aunt Isabel's far and wide experience of "girls in love,"—chronicles which embraced the amatory vicissitudes of Sarah the cook, as well as the "heart's own lamentations" committed to paper by Mdlle. Heyfalutin, the Franco-Hibernian governess, at one time bent on subduing the very refractory temper of "Mdlle. Josephine."

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Alas! neither the cook nor the languishing "Mademoiselle" were ever known in any sense to *ridicule* any lord of the creation who happened for the time being to reign paramount in their variously susceptible bosoms. And here was Miss Maud Gwynne,

an attractive young lady, one who no doubt was fully aware of the spell her beauty had cast over the heart of her youthful adorer, and who, in lieu of accepting this tribute with sentiment and grace—laughed at it.

"What is your candid opinion about all this, Gregory?" Mrs. Crawford inquired of her brother with an anxious voice and look. Mr. Winton glanced up from his newspaper, and shrugged his shoulders in disgust at this untimely interruption. His sister was fully aware of this manifestation on his part, which she inwardly resented as most unseemly. Outwardly she took no notice of it, only adding after a dubious pause, "Pray give me your impression, brother, it would be quite refreshing to me to hear you offer an opinion of your own for once. Thinking isn't particularly hard work, but

you neither think nor act, as far as I can make out."

"You've been good enough to do as much of both for me as ever was required to keep this house in order, Iza," remarked Mr. Winton dryly.

He was far too wary a bird to allow himself to be entrapped into an argument with a glib-tongued woman.

His sister thoroughly understood this persistent caution of his, and, like a truly wise woman, always humoured instead of crossing her mankind, and never wasted powder by nagging.

She was fully aware of the tactics necessary for the achievement of her own desires, and, what is a much rarer accomplishment, able to subdue her own inclinations accordingly.

So, in this instance, although ready and eager for a battle of words, she refrained

from the irritation of further speech at the moment, and continued her knitting in perfect silence and apparent indifference.

The result of her discretion very soon made itself apparent in the abrupt folding up of her brother's newspaper, and in his launching forth without further prelude, into the following somewhat startling speech,

"That proud girl takes to our boy more kindly than you have any idea of, Iza, and its the right sort of kindness too, for *love* is at the bottom of it. She is twenty-six, and he is twenty-two, quite a baby from her womanly point of view."

"Now, there are several sorts of love, as you may know without troubling me for any explanations."

"Pray don't take any trouble on my account, Gregory," said Mrs. Isabel curtly.

"It's as well for a man to make himself

clearly understood while he is about it," he answered decisively; and she retorted with a nod, "Quite so!"

"Well," resumed Mr. Winton "we'll take it for granted that you know the various phases of love, therefore you are no doubt aware that none suits some *mens feminæ* better than the love which encourages, defends, and protects its object. So it is with this typical 'Juno'—she regards the pretty lad Aubrey, who is the counterpart of her pretty friend Nora, with a condescending affection which is none the less tender and sincere for having a spice of the *maternal* in it."

"Gregory!" exclaimed Mrs. Crawford, fairly astonished by this totally unexpected burst of opinion from her usually apathetic brother.

"I've startled you, have I?" said he with

an amused smile, and added with a chuckle of pleasant anticipation,

"I only hope you'll startle me one of these days by telling me either that our high and mighty heiress has eloped with my pretty good-for-nothing son, or that she has proposed to procure a licence and means to marry him off-hand."

The brother and sister were closeted in the library just after breakfast one morning, exactly a week after Maud Gwynne's arrival at Winton Hall, and it was there this confidential conversation over the dear Aubrey's prospects had taken place.

"Alan arrives in time for luncheon to-day, father!" cried Nora, suddenly entering the library, a brilliant flush on her fair young face, a glad light in her clear blue eyes, and a pink telegram-paper held aloft in a small hand which was trembling with agitation.

"Dear me! dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Crawford flushing in her turn, but with a very different emotion, no doubt. She rose from her chair, thrust her knitting hurriedly into the ample pockets of her "tennis apron," and declared that she must "rush away" to see that all was in good order before this honoured and most welcome guest should arrive.

"You *are* pleased, both of you, aren't you?" questioned Nora timidly, and with such pretty wistfulness in her look and attitude that both her father and aunt were moved to quite an unwonted tenderness.

This modest gentle little Nora had certainly distinguished herself in a most remarkable degree. Some such thought was in the mind of both elders as they looked at her, and she was so quiet, so unassuming withal.

How differently would Josephine have

borne herself had the triumph of the landing of Alan Gwynne, Esq., of Gwynne Castle, rewarded her boldly-baited line.

"Of course we're pleased and very pleased too, for your sake as well as our own, little lady," said Mr. Winton, in order to reassure his timid daughter as she stood anxious to ascertain the degree of welcome likely to be awarded to her lover.

"His valet and his groom will come, father," suggested Nora, faltering at the bare mention of all these claimants upon her father's hospitality.

"Well, my dear," interposed her aunt hurriedly, "that is a matter of course, and I'll take care they're all properly looked after."

"I really think such a tribe of servants had better be lodged at the Red Lion by their master," said Mr. Winton argumentatively.

The Red Lion was the one "house of entertainment" of which the neighbouring village boasted.

"My dear Gregory," exclaimed his sister hurriedly, pressing her niece's trembling little hand to reassure the poor anxious child. "My dear Gregory, I think you must admit that in the twenty odd years in which I have kept house for you, I have not been guilty of unseemly extravagance, nor have I in any sense indulged in the lavish expense entailed by reckless hospitality." She clothed her assertion in the rising tone of an interrogation, and confronted her brother as she uttered the last word.

"That is true enough," he answered, but not very readily.

The astute "housekeeper," however, was quite satisfied by this reluctant acquiescence in her managerial powers, and boldly resumed:

"You grant that I know what I'm about, Gregory; well, now I mean to prove the justice of your conclusion by the right royal fashion in which we will entertain this wealthy country gentleman. It isn't a matter of daily occurrence, remember, that so eligible a suitor as Mr. Gwynne comes riding up to a poor man's castle, condescends to ask for some entertainment there, and finally carries off his host's youngest daughter, a portionless girl whose only fortune is in her face."

"And in her good kind heart," suggested the father mollified.

"Shall I have no marriage portion at all to bring to Alan?" asked Nora, blushing so painfully that her eyes filled with tears; "is all the generosity to be on his side, father?"

"Under the marriage settlement made for

your poor mother, Nora, her little fortune all goes to issue male—Aubrey, that is—and so you and your sister have no claim upon it."

Nora's face fell in evident consternation.

"I did not at all like the arrangement at the time," continued her father almost apologetically; "but it was left to the lawyers to settle, and we young people were not consulted at all. I mean to allow you £200 per annum as pin-money from your twenty-first birthday, however, so you'll not be quite a pauper after all."

His tone and manner were far kinder than Nora remembered in all her past experience of this coolly indifferent parent.

She was very young, very guileless, and wholly inexperienced. No thought of money or money's worth had ever troubled her individually; it was only through adven-

turous Josephine, who gambled, betted, and speculated with her brother and the officers at Churton, and any other "*play*-fellows" she might manage to inveigle, that Nora had of late been introduced to certain monetary *facts*, the hard reality of which, as regarded herself, had never touched her nearly, until Josephine chose to taunt the future "penniless bride" with certain coarse speculations as to the absurd value the would-be bridegroom evidently put upon the acquisition of this inexperienced little pauper wife.

It was the bitter remembrance of Josephine's disparaging insinuations which had egged poor little Nora on to make this one desperate appeal to her father.

It seemed so terribly humiliating to the right-minded girl that her generous lover should be called upon to give her everything,

while she knew she had nothing to offer him in her turn, but a pure woman's first love and most heartfelt devotion.

Priceless gifts these, as Alan Gwynne well knew, and he knew how to value them at their true worth.

CHAPTER V.

ALAN GWYNNE, ESQ., J. P.

NEVER had Winton Hall looked so bright, so gay, so animated, and so thoroughly hospitable, as it did on the day of the expected arrival of Nora's rich lover.

It was early in May, and all the quaint old windows of the hall were set wide open to let in every breath of the sweetly-scented summer air.

Nora, the very personification of happy enterprise and energy, fully aware that this was an occasion on which no effort could be spared, enlisted both Maud and Josephine,

the former by simple entreaties, the latter by most audacious bribes, to lend her a helping hand in the manifold adornment of the rooms which Alan would so soon honour with his most welcome and most anxiously longed-for presence.

Every available vase and glass were filled with freshly gathered flowers; dainty muslin curtains were first carefully fastened on the quaint old woodwork of the dark old-fashioned window-frames, and then looped back in graceful folds with natty rose-coloured bows, to fashion which Nora had sacrificed the entire trimming of her prettiest morning-gown. What mattered her ribbons she thought, if by the gift of them Alan's room might be made to look yet more inviting?

The girl was thoroughly in love, and only too delighted to ignore herself utterly, if by

so doing she might hope to bring an approving smile to her dear hero's lips, or a pleased look into his eloquent eyes.

He certainly was a man not only worth loving, but decidedly worth any exertion of which a woman was morally or physically capable, in order to secure and captivate him.

So thought Josephine, scanning her sister's lover eagerly with those bold black eyes of hers, to which envy at that moment lent an additional and almost uncanny lustre.

Mr. Gwynne had but lately arrived at Winton Hall, and as he mounted the broad steps which led to the verandah and then took up his position there, one of his hands in Juno's safe keeping, the other clasping Nora's little trembling fingers, Josephine, hidden by an overgrown support of the roof of the verandah, surveyed

and watched the newly-arrived guest at her pleasure. She saw a tall distinguished-looking man with remarkably handsome features, and that peculiarly gracious bearing which is generally described as *aristocratic*.

That Alan Gwynne was born and bred a gentleman in the true sense of the word, no one could doubt. His varied experience of life at home and during extensive continental travels, had lent him a certain polished courtesy of manner which is to women especially fascinating; and as Josephine from her hiding-place curiously watched her sister's lover, she felt that if such a man as that were to woo her she would be the happiest, the proudest girl in all the world.

"For his sake I'd reform even," thought envious Josephine. "I'd give up betting for money, and gloves too; and if he didn't like

me to waltz with other fellows, I'd even sacrifice dancing for the sake of his sovereign pleasure; that's what I'd do for such a handsome and *distingué* man as he is. And to think that that baby Nora, with no more notion of what *such* a man is worth than any other inexperienced school girl, should have managed to hook him, and should be going to cut a dash in the world as Mrs. Alan Gwynne, wife of a J. P.; such a young and delightful J. P. too. It seems like a farce to think of this fascinating young swell as a *judge*. I suppose a J. P. is a judge of some sort—perhaps it's a complimentary title, for who could fancy *him* in a wig and gown? Oh, dear! oh, dear! if only there was some justice in the world, then I should get a chance of a decent husband too. Now Nora is to be Mrs. Gwynne, and Aubrey, who's got all the

money of the family, will be carried off by that domineering affected Miss Juno—*Juno* indeed! why not Venus at once?—and I, the pluckiest rider in the county, and out and out the best stayer in a ball-room, am left to 'dree my weird' in solitary misery."

* * * *

These were the somewhat unsatisfactory reflections of Miss Josephine Winton as she surveyed the lively group within the drawing-room, from her coign of vantage without.

It really seemed to this wordly-wise girl quite a deplorable mistake on Mr. Gwynne's part, that he should have selected such a "timid inexperienced little chit of a school-girl" as Nora, to do the honours of Castle Gwynne, when he might have secured so much more valuable an ally in Nora's elder sister.

There might still be a chance of showing him the error of his ways, and leading him into more advantageous paths, concluded this amicable young lady; and hurriedly pulling the rough abundant tangle of her curling black hair over her forehead, she stepped forth from her hiding-place, entered the drawing-room in apparently eager haste, and, feigning astonishment at the arrival of Mr. Gwynne, cordially extended both her hands to him in "*hearty sisterly* welcome," as she said with a brilliant smile, and added that she hoped they might be "the best of friends."

Nora, who had sought the support of "Juno's" arm, to which the younger girl clung in happy confidingness, looked on at this auspicious meeting between her capricious sister and her courteous lover with unmixed satisfaction. If Josephine meant

to make herself agreeable to this honoured guest, Nora felt that all must go smoothly, since her interview with her father and aunt had assured her that the heads of the house intended to make her future husband very welcome. Indeed, nothing could have been more satisfactory than the first few days Mr. Gwynne spent at the Hall.

Aubrey, "*most awfully smitten*" as he was with Maud (this was his own definition of his love-sick plight), was not so utterly regardless of consequences as rash young lovers are apt to be, who have no guardian angel in the shape of a diplomatic elderly female at hand, to watch over and guide their affections discreetly in the proper groove which leads to matrimony. Aubrey was sufficiently sentimental by nature, and quite sufficiently enamoured of Juno, the "Queen of Heaven"—as he called her in

his private enthusiasm—to have thrown all caution, all *ménagement*, to the winds, in his reckless adoration of this handsome guest.

But here Aunt Isabel, the family diplomatist, and the watchful sentinel over Aubrey's impetuous passion, came to the young man's rescue. She kept guard over him; she consulted, advised, and restrained him by turns. And at the most critical period of the advent of Mr. Gwynne, uncle and guardian, she incessantly preached care and caution into her nephew's unwilling ear.

"You will lose your chance with her, and certainly offend him," Mrs. Crawford declared on several occasions, when Aubrey's determination either to monopolise "Juno," or to sulk with the rest of the party, became evident. The young man

hated his aunt's preaching; but he knew she was perfectly right in her forebodings, and as he certainly was quite as anxious as she could be, that he should win this glorious prize in the matrimonial lottery, he earnestly strove to subdue his personal desire invariably to monopolise Miss Gwynne, and exerted himself, as far as he was able, to contribute to the general entertainment of the party assembled at the Hall. By dint of persevering remonstrance and persuasion, administered in strong alternate doses to Mrs. Crawford and to Nora, Josephine managed to obtain formal invitations to three young men—two officers and one F. O. clerk, the former from the barracks at Churton, the latter from town—who in due course arrived with their Gladstone bags, and settled themselves in the scantily furnished bache-

lor apartments, of which Winton Hall boasted a considerable number.

The chief amusement of all the party, now staying at the Hall, was riding; and, in the saddle, the three girls—Juno, Jo, and Nora—certainly appeared to the utmost advantage. It was the more to be regretted, therefore, that hunting is an unattainable delight in "ye merrie month of May," and that the extent of the ladies' prowess could only be exhibited in their perfect command over their horses during certain impromptu trials of speed, occasional *bursts* across some grassy slopes, and a "fly" over hurdles or timber.

Nora, light of heart, and fairy-light in the saddle, sped on with Madcap, to the intense admiration and delight of Mr. Gwynne, who positively basked in the glad sunshine which, at this time, seemed to fall

upon his favoured head with double brilliance, since it lit up the fair summer's day, and beamed in tenderest reflections in the loving glances of his sweet young bride-elect. Truly, all went "merry as a marriage-bell;" and, up to the day fixed for the much-discussed "dance," scarcely a *contretemps* occurred to mar the pleasant harmony pervading Winton Hall, from the suddenly augmented and exhilarated kitchen retinue, to those pretty quaint sky-parlours which were set apart for "the young ladies."

"I want you to come for a ride with me alone this morning, my darling," whispered Alan to Nora, as they left the breakfast-room; "I want you to try my good horse with a side-saddle, because he is splendid across country, and if his paces suit you, I mean to make him over to you

for hunting purposes, when we are *at home*, next autumn.

"What! the Crusader?" cried Nora, flushing hotly all over her face and neck. Was it the notion of riding that gallant steed which so troubled her, or the tender whisper of Alan's melodious voice, as he said "*when we* are at home!"

He had his arm about her shoulder, and, as he spoke, he drew his little love with him towards the library. He wanted to talk to her all alone for awhile, a happiness which the continual presence of strangers (and friends) had rendered impossible hitherto; for the lovers seemed to carry an audience with them wherever they moved —rather a trying contingency, when the desire for confidential love-talk has become the *alpha* and *omega* of two young lives.

CHAPTER VI.

TENDER AND TRUE.

"Sit in this chair of your great grandmother's, Nora, while I kneel at your dear little feet, and give me your small hands to lay my face into, and talk to me prettily so."

Alan suited his actions to his words, he knelt at her feet, and he gratefully hid his face in her hands, and then he waited in longing silence for her "pretty talk." She, made timid by the very excess of the happiness she experienced in his dear presence,

could find no words in which to clothe her feelings of ultra content.

Having kissed her hands, he looked up into her sweet smiling face and, by way of introduction to the conversation in which he had expected her to take the lead, he asked,

"Do you like the notion of trying the Crusader?"

"Of course I do, but I am by no means sure I can manage him."

"Your clever and delicate little fingers will suit him to a T," said the enthusiastic lover; "that horse is a gentleman by disposition, and he will be just as amenable to your gentle rule as I hope always to prove myself. I should so love to see my wife holding her own gallantly among the many Amazons that distinguish themselves with the Dashshire hunt."

"And I should so love to do all you wish

always and everywhere," said Nora fervently; and as he turned his happy face up towards hers, and plainly showed her what he most wished for at that moment—she yielded her lips to his, and proved the truth of her previous protestation by bestowing the first voluntary kiss upon him.

Then, a little troubled by her own amazing temerity, she drew away, and resting her head against that very straight-backed chair of her grandmother's, in which he had placed her, wondered what next he would choose to say to delight her.

* * * *

Whatever loving thought was in his mind, however, did not get itself spoken, for at this inopportune moment Josephine entered the room, with that noisily irritating abruptness of movement which always distinguished this impetuous young lady.

She just had the grace to *pretend* to pause as she crossed the threshold and beheld the the lovers; but Mr. Gwynne, painfully aware that there was never to be a moment's peace for him with his little love in this crowded mansion, had hastily risen, and now, with the bashfulness characteristic of the *best* of *men*, was vainly striving to look as if he had never knelt, or kissed, or whispered "soft nothings" in all his life.

"Spooning, by Jove!" muttered Josephine with whitening lips and an unconsciously clenched fist, and ere the necessary and conventional smile of "propriety" returned to her face, she had added two monosyllables which might have been construed into a curse, had they fallen on the astounded ear of a chance listener.

But no words were audible, and the proper society smile successfully masked the rage

which for a moment had convulsed her face.

"I have come with a petition, Alan!" she said, endeavouring to modulate her voice agreeably, "and if you don't accede to my request at once, I must get Nora to put some pressure on for me."

"What is it, Jo?" asked Nora, and felt absurdly anxious lest the forthcoming request might not be quite to the liking of her lover.

"Can Jo be going to ask him for money?" she thought with a sudden tightening of her heart-strings; she knew of Josephine's constant debts and constant greed for money, and she also knew to her shame that Aubrey had already borrowed fifty pounds from Mr. Gwynne on the plea of some pressing debt of which he did not dare to tell his father.

Josephine's next words, however, reassured her anxious sister.

"I have an intense desire to try your good horse Crusader with a habit," she said; "will you give me leave?".

"He has never carried a lady," Mr. Gwynne said doubtfully, and Nora waited in some trepidation. Why should Alan refuse her sister the privilege he had but just offered to her?

There was an uncomfortable silence, which the younger girl courageously broke by saying,

"Jo is a much better and a much safer rider than I am, Alan; indeed she will acquit herself far better on Crusader than I could hope to do." She glanced timidly from her sister to her lover as she spoke, and to her dismay she saw that both of them looked displeased. Jo felt so, for from Nora's words she inferred that Crusader had actually been offered to that "little chit," who was

frightened to ride him no doubt. As Josephine, however, had a specially urgent reason for gaining her point just now, she resolved to "dissemble."

And struggling to smile and speak coaxingly, she approached her sister and whispered,

"Get him to say *yes*, even if it is only for *your dear sake*."

Mr. Gwynne heard the appeal, as it was intended he should do; and as he met Nora's imploring glance, the frown on his face made way for a smile which his little love welcomed with a merry peal of laughter.

"Now I know you are going to say 'yes,' and thank you so much, dear Alan." She slipped her little fingers into his hand, and he clasped them firmly, then turning to Josephine he said impressively,

"Crusader wants a light hand and won't stand the curb at all."

"Oh! I know all about that," she answered impatiently, "and as I'm going round to the stables now, I'll order the whole lot out; we may as well set forth in a bunch as usual."

She turned on her heel and strode away into the billiard-room, where Aubrey and the other three men, who were at this time comfortably established at the Hall, were playing "50 up."

Aubrey, whose face expressed supreme disgust, had just contrived to miss a simple cannon.

His opponent, somewhat unduly elated, was crowing very lustily over the advantages accruing to him, thanks to Aubrey's having "muffed it."

"Never holloa till you're out of the wood, Mr. Blythe," cried Josephine, giving her irate brother a hearty slap on the back by way of gentle encouragement.

Mr. Blythe, Aubrey's adversary, meanwhile concentrated all his attention upon his game; since Jo's re-appearance he had become doubly anxious to win, and her passing taunt fired his ardour.

He now got the red ball upon the spot, and pocketed it six times in rapid succession.

This "break" was received with groans by poor Aubrey, and shouts of approval by Captain Francis, Mr. Blythe's backer, and by Josephine, who, with the slang of a connoisseur, capped her approval by crying "Cook in disguise"—for the solution of which enigmatical jargon, the non-playing reader is respectfully referred to any professor of experience.

The game having now come to a triumphant end, as far as Mr. Blythe was concerned, that gentleman proposed to give Aubrey his revenge.

But at this moment Josephine interposed—"First hand over my fiver, Aubrey," said she holding out her hand, "I've fairly won it. My lord J. P. was most gracious, and I'm now going to have a side-saddle put on that paragon of horseflesh, the Crusader."

"I backed you to win, Miss Jo," cried Mr. Blythe with enthusiasm. "I am all for the ladies, the dear, dear ladies," added this chivalrous and very youthful warrior, whose head-quarters were at Churton barracks.

"I really can't pay you until to-morrow, Jo," Aubrey whispered to his sister. "I'm regularly stumped, old girl; upon my soul I am, and as things are in such a ticklish state just now, I positively *dare* not put the guv. out by asking him for a penny."

"No; don't bully him just now, there's a good boy," answered Josephine hurriedly;

"he'd be for turning all these jolly fellows out neck and crop if you did."

Aubrey on this made a melancholy grimace, and Josephine, in a still lower tone but with much emphasis, added,

"Take my advice, child, tackle your 'queen of heaven,' make frantic love to her, and don't give over until you make her whisper the magic monosyllable—d'ye hear? That would be the right way to fetch the governor and old Jezebel, too, who is bullying my life out now to 'hurry matters forward' for you and that *blessed* heiress."

"Jo, I will not have you speak in that way of—of—" stammered Aubrey flushing hot, and clenching his fists in his desire to repress either his anger or her taunts.

"Of—of—" laughed Jo; "is it of the 'queen of heaven' ye'd spake, my lad? Make haste now and bring her down, ye little spoon."

CHAPTER VII.

A GAY CAVALCADE.

"You don't look pleased, dear Alan," whispered Nora tenderly, as she placed her small foot in her lover's palm, and with that assistance vaulted lightly into her saddle.

When Alan was there to lend her a helping hand, she disdained the independent accomplishment of which she was rather proud on other occasions.

She was essentially womanly in all her attributes, and quite as proud of acknowledging her absolute dependence on her betrothed, as Josephine was of proving to

men that she was as well able as any one of them, to shift for herself.

As soon as Nora was comfortably settled in the saddle, she bent her pretty head again and repeated her anxious inquiry to her lover about his troubled looks.

Before he had time to reassure her he also had mounted, and now, seated on one of the so-called "first-class hacks" provided by Messrs. Hoof and Golong, he approached his little love and, with an ominous contraction of his usually serene brow, whispered,

"Can you wonder that I am not pleased, Nora? I had set my heart on taking *you*, you dear gentle-handed child, for a charming dawdling ride through all the lanes we could find this morning, and I longed to see your skilful fingers handling my noble Crusader, whereas now—"

He paused suddenly, indeed it was with

an effort he had repressed a hasty speech, which, as he remembered just in time, would be sure to give his lady-love pain.

The fact was that he felt sorely tempted to make some remarks, which would have been the reverse of complimentary, about that bold-eyed, unfeminine sister of hers, who at this moment was putting a climax to his indignation by the heavy hand she was laying upon the curb, which proud and sensitive Crusader evidently resented by a remonstrant toss of his beautiful head.

From the first moment in which Alan Gwynne's eyes had encountered that searching and yet defiant look of Josephine's black eyes, he had conceived an instinctive dislike and distrust of her; and the more solicitous and marked her attentions, civilities, and show of "*sisterly*" tenderness

became, the more utterly did he feel repelled.

For his dear Nora's sake, this gallant man earnestly strove to subdue the horrible feeling of repulsion which made all intercourse with Josephine a positive pain to him.

He had a strong will, and was always able to control any outward exhibition of his emotion; and so he taught himself to submit to all Miss Josephine's persistent attention so amiably and with such a very good grace that she certainly never suspected him of any lack of affection for herself.

His manner towards her was always studiedly polite, perhaps even a little haughty at times; but this hauteur Josephine considered an undeniable sign of "the extreme of high breeding," and as such it raised Mr. Gwynne still higher in her estimation.

So thoroughly ignorant and inexperienced was bold Miss Josephine as to the real character and attributes of her sister's betrothed, that his frigid demeanour had even suggested the wildest possibilities to her ill-regulated mind.

For she began to think it was by no means unlikely that the coldness, distinguishing the conduct of this man of the world towards her, was but a mask he wore to conceal his warm admiration for her.

Indeed, after much reflection and the misinterpretation of most of his looks and words, Josephine managed to convince herself that Alan Gwynne was struggling with a hopeless passion for herself, all outward evidence of which he sternly repressed, as likely to offend Nora.

Silly, soft, unappreciative little Nora!

what wonder Mr. Gwynne should turn in disgust from her, when Josephine was by, who so thoroughly understood men and their many and varying humours? It was thus unsuspecting little Nora's sister settled matters to her own thorough satisfaction, despising her foolish junior and pitying poor Alan, who, being a true *gentleman*, and having once pledged his word to the younger girl, felt himself in all honour compelled to hide from her his newly-awakened interest in her accomplished sister.

Whether, as Josephine thus reflected, her prowess in the saddle and at pool and pyramids, appeared to herself as accomplishments, matters little, the gist of her mental arguing certainly remained the same, and that was the conviction that Alan Gwynne was learning to *appreciate* her.

Josephine's own admiration for her future brother-in-law had strengthened in exact proportion to the number of hours she contrived to spend in his society, and it had now, after the lapse of some ten days of more or less constant intercourse, assumed considerable proportions.

Even her betting and manœuvring this morning, to obtain the loan of the Crusader, was but a *ruse* on her part to secure more of Mr. Gwynne's attention and company than he might feel himself justified in giving her, without the excuse of having to watch her skill in the management of his favourite horse.

The Crusader — perhaps controlled by some *gentlemanly* instinct, which the intelligent animal really seemed to have learnt from his gallant master—certainly behaved himself admirably.

He controlled his natural resentment at the cruel weight of his new rider's unfeminine touch on the curb, and at the flapping of her habit against his side, and the only protest he ventured to offer was that tossing of his handsome head, which, at the moment of starting, had so sadly disconcerted his tender-hearted master.

Josephine was proudly conscious of the beauty of the horse which carried her, and not a little elated by the knowledge that her own figure, closely clad in its admirably fitting habit, must show to the utmost advantage.

There was not another girl in the county who sat a horse like Jo Winton, so Jo Winton had been told scores of times in the last ten years, and it was a pleasant fact to which she subscribed unhesitatingly.

To-day, when first she mounted, and as

she went through a few preliminary paces, she felt more than usually flattered by the scrutinising glances which both Maud and Alan bestowed upon her, and which she naturally assumed must be complimentary.

Whenever "Jo" was in good spirits, she was restless and noisy.

To-day she gave vent to her delight by prolonged bursts of loud laughter, which jarred even on Nora's ears, who certainly had never grudged her sister a moment's enjoyment, and always strove to force herself to enter into her evident hilarity, however little she could manage to sympathise with the subjects that most delighted Jo.

But to-day, poor little Nora, perhaps unconsciously, disconcerted by her lover's very grave face, felt that this boisterous merriment of her sister's must affect both Alan

and Maud, and she heartily wished that "poor Jo" could contrive to laugh with a little less noise.

Maud, however, was too much interested in the subdued talk of the "Adonis" by her side, to pay much attention to the remainder of the party.

Josephine was leading the cavalcade, closely attended by "the young fellows," who certainly all paid her the compliment she most desired, by treating her absolutely as though she also were a "good fellow," and one of themselves.

To judge from the tenour of their desultory chat, they evidently considered that "Jo" knew quite as much about regimental duties, mess-rooms, and the usual haunts of gay bachelors and men about town, as they themselves did.

She certainly joined in all their jargon of

guard- or mess-room and stable, as though she had spent the best part of her time in the officers' quarters at Churton.

No wonder the proud and sensitive master of Gwynne Castle rebelled at the notion of prospective kinship with so unfeminine a specimen of the genus "young lady" as Jo Winton daily proved herself.

It had even occurred to Alan that he might have hesitated a very long time before declaring his love to gentle Nora, if he had previously become acquainted with this terrible sister of hers.

But if such an idea did cross his mind at times, he always impatiently dismissed it, feeling it to be a cruel wrong to his sweet little love, whose sterling qualities of course shone all the brighter by reason of their startling contrast with the meretricious attributes of her coarse sister.

It seemed to Alan a wonderful thing that one roof should have sheltered two such dissimilar beings as Nora and Josephine, and that two natures, so manifestly opposed to one another, could have sprung from the same parent stem.

It was certainly all the more creditable to Nora, that, in spite of this invidious companionship, she had preserved her gentle mind and refined demeanour, in no sense yielding herself to the injurious influence of her bold, bad sister.

To Alan, Josephine did appear both bold and bad, and her manifest overtures for his attention and admiration always disgusted instead of gratifying him, as might have been the case with a less experienced or a vainer man.

CHAPTER VIII.

JUNO DESCENDS FROM HER CLOUDS.

THAT morning's ride, though neither an unusual nor an important occurrence in itself, was fraught with weighty consequences.

In the first place Josephine had, to her own satisfaction if to nobody else's, proved her perfect horsemanship and gloried noisily in her triumph.

The immediate result of this was her bragging of her prowess to Mr. Gwynne, in a manner so thoroughly repugnant to his

feelings that he could not quite master his indignation.

And when she, shouting with laughter, tried his patience yet further by volunteering "for a cool fiver" to take Crusader across a certain gate, at the end of a meadow through which they were all cantering, he suddenly laid his hand on the good horse's bridle, and absolutely and in the sternest manner forbade her playing any further tricks with his cattle.

Josephine, impetuous always, on this occasion lost all control over herself and in a torrent of angry reproach upbraided her sister, and that sister's "prig and bully of a lover," in language as startling as it was horrible to most of those who heard her.

"Come away, ladies," Mr. Gwynne had said, while the termagant was still scolding, and with a peremptory movement towards

Nora and Maud, he turned his horse's head homeward, the girls and Aubrey following him in perfect silence.

Between Aubrey and his constant companion during this ride, as during all the other excursions lately undertaken by the party from Winton Hall, matters had also come to a crisis, though by no means to a bellicose one.

Juno, in a gentle, yielding and thoroughly womanly mood, had listened patiently to the young man's tender pleading, and felt really touched by the humility which threw itself weakly, but with unhesitating faith and boundless confidence, upon her strength and her mercy.

"I know you are far too grand and good and beautiful and rich and—and—everything for me, Juno," poor Aubrey had admitted—"but—Oh! I *do* love you so;

and if only you will be patient with me, and help me to do whatever you think would please you most—I'll promise faithfully to obey you—without hesitation, in every single thing."

"Juno," proud, resolute, and thoroughly independent herself, felt that she would indeed be well able to take the leading-strings of this vacillating Adonis into her own firm and clever grasp.

There had been a time when she had volunteered to look after and guide timid Nora. Now Nora's only brother appealed to her in a somewhat similar strain; or so, at least, the girl felt and received his "offer."

Nora had given herself over to the dominion of a man she had learnt to love, and to him she now looked as her guide and protector in all things.

Young "Adonis"—as Maud loved to

call handsome Aubrey—had only *her* to look up to and to lean upon; would it be right or just or even *kind* to refuse him the moral support she felt herself so thoroughly fitted to give him?

* * * *

So, quietly observant Mr. Winton was right in his deductions, and this fact by no means detracted from his intense satisfaction when Aubrey—rushing into the library in hot haste after his ride—whispered to his father with a flushing face,

"I'm the happiest fellow in all the wide world—my beautiful Queen of Heaven has come down from her clouds of glory and promised to marry me."

It was with a very different air that poor Nora presently crept into her father's sanctum, and with tearful eyes and a painfully deprecating voice had to admit that

Jo had behaved uncourteously to Mr. Gwynne, and that she (Nora) feared he was very, very much offended. Mrs. Crawford had entered the library during this second interview, having just been elated by the good news Aubrey whispered to her in the corridor.

"I'll settle the disagreeables for you, Gregory," said his strong-minded sister, with more even than her usual decision in look and tone. "Now that that blessed boy Aubrey has brought sunshine into our house once more, it would indeed be hard if Jo's vile temper should bring the dark clouds back again."

How Aunt "Jezebel" managed her refractory and violent niece matters little.

About the ropes and pulleys that move the most important living marionnettes in this world, we really know very little.

We are mostly bound to content ourselves with such results as are evidenced by certain actions, *i.e.*, with definite facts.

In this case the facts were indisputable.

Josephine had spoken hastily and with unwarrantable rudeness, and Josephine must be made to eat very humble pie. Perhaps Aunt Isabel did not find the task of arguing with her refractory niece as difficult as she had anticipated.

Like most hasty persons, Josephine was as ready to repent after her attacks as she was to plunge into a battle of words on the first provocation.

To-day she was quite aware that she had spoken in hot haste, and that she was much to blame for all that had occurred.

The fact of Mr. Gwynne's turning and riding away from her had instantly sobered her, and she was quite willing now "to

prevent his instant departure" (this was one of the aunt's most potent arguments), by writing him a humble letter of apology.

"But I'd die sooner than that stuck-up Maud or that little prig Nora should see it," reiterated Miss Jo with vicious vehemence.

On this point, however, her aunt was able instantly to silence her protestations.

"Write 'private and confidential' on the letter," she said, "and remember your own opinion about Mr. Gwynne's high breeding. Would he be capable of exhibiting any lady's letter?"

"Surely no," cried Josephine warmly; "for that is conduct the most contemptible cad revolts from."

The letter certainly was written and duly delivered to Mr. Gwynne.

And Aunt Isabel, during this uncommonly

satisfactory interview with her niece, either bribed or rewarded that young lady by the promise of the often hoped-for and much-discussed "dance."

"It is a settled affair now," Mrs. Crawford declared, "and it must be a ball; in honour of Aubrey's engagement."

"Has that stuck-up hussy accepted him?" cried Josephine, with a sudden recurrence of anger.

Mrs. Crawford only lifted a deprecating hand—but no further word was spoken between them.

Perhaps the niece felt that one scene in a day was as much as she cared to make atonement for.

Juno, whose actions were of a right royal calibre, large and generous like her individuality, could not allow an hour to pass over her handsome head without giving those dear

to her the chance of sharing her newly-consummated happiness.

"I shall be your very own sister now, really and really"—she had whispered to poor Nora, who was still pale, tearful, and trembling after the sad occurrences of that unfortunate ride, and her subsequent interview with her father.

Maud's happy hopefulness consoled her—but, alas! what would her guardian say to the girl who meant to marry Josephine's brother?

He *can* say nothing. "I have been of age these last five years," cried Maud, exulting. "He can only give me his blessing; and that I am sure he will do with a very, very good grace."

"Oh, Maud dear! I am not so sure of his satisfaction as you seem to be. I know he was terribly annoyed with Jo, and no wonder!"

"But neither you nor—nor *my* love have anything in common with Miss Winton, except her name," declared Maud with vehemence.

"She is our only sister, dear," responded Nora gently; but there was as much firmness in her quiet tone as in Juno's defiant assertion.

"I beg your pardon and Aubrey's," said Juno kindly and humbly; "and for your dear sakes I'll be so meek with guardie that he will be quite touched by my humility, and refuse me nothing—not even a perfect reconciliation with Miss Jo, who very likely is as sorry for her naughtiness by this time as we all of us are."

* * * *

When Maud entered her guardian's room, she found him occupied in answering Miss Winton's "private and confidential" letter of apology.

He showed the envelope of that document to his ward.

"I have just signed a treaty of peace," he said with a smile, and added, with a deep tenderness which touched Maud keenly, "I can do many things for Nora's sake, you see."

"Just as I mean to do all things for her dear brother's," whispered Maud, for a moment hiding her face upon her uncle's shoulder.

"You don't mean to tell me, your prudent guardian, that you have engaged yourself to—to—Aubrey Winton?" he asked, after a long and somewhat uncomfortable pause.

"Indeed I do, and I'm proud of it," declared Miss Juno, with a face that bore testimony to the truth of her words.

"I cannot congratulate you either on

your wisdom or on the excellent qualifications of your choice, my poor girl," said Alan Gwynne.

He spoke very kindly now, but his tone was as full of regret as his words.

"The only pleasant things I can find to say of that young man are, that he is decidedly good looking, and that I should consider him incapable of harm. He does not appear to me to have sufficient energy for the accomplishment of either good or evil."

"Guardie!" cried Maud dismayed, and a little independent, too, "but I *love* him!"

"Faith, we are told, may move mountains, perchance love may make a roaring lion out of a bleating lamb, and you are going to be the gentle shepherdess, my Juno?"

"I mean to try," said Juno quite humbly.

"Oh, how have the mighty fallen!" cried Alan Gwynne, but he pressed his niece's hand tenderly, and she knew that though not pleased, he still was by no means angry with her.

As for her choice, she herself was quite satisfied about that, and she resolved to take good care that others should ere long be brought to see that she had good cause for her content.

* * * *

Would Juno have felt quite as happy and complacent, if she had been aware of the mission on which her lover had but just departed? Ostensibly, he was going to ride over to Churton to secure some first-rate dancers from the barracks there, for the ball now fixed to take place, at Winton Hall, within a fortnight.

Mrs. Crawford herself had settled all

preliminaries at the luncheon-table, where all the party met with apparent friendliness.

That Nora looked pale and sad, and that Josephine laughed less than usual, was not surprising to any of the guests.

Mrs. Crawford, always bustling and enterprising, was especially so to-day, and once having started the subject of "the ball," soon set conversation flowing glibly and cheerfully on all possible details of the forthcoming festivities.

Aubrey, who as usual sat next to Maud Gwynne, was very silent, and evidently preoccupied; but Maud received this as a special compliment.

How could Adonis talk when his heart was so full of happiness—the happiness she had just caused him? On his way to the dining-room, he had whispered to her, "Have you spoken to your guardian yet?"

And she had seen that he was nervous and troubled then.

She was already longing to get her interview with her uncle over, so that she might reassure her timid lover.

When Mrs. Crawford suggested that "some one" should go over to Churton to enlist the services of "dancing-recruits," and Aubrey, suddenly brightening, volunteered to ride over himself, Maud managed to whisper to him, "I'll give you good news on your return."

And she had stood on the steps to watch him "mount and ride away," and thrown him some very gracious kisses from her slender finger-tips.

How little the women, who stand so wistfully gazing after "the parting men," to whom they have bidden "God-speed!" really know of the destination for which the beloved man is bound?

How often he presses a fond kiss on the lips he leaves behind him, and whispers some laughing reassurance of his faithful affection, ere he says his last word of adieu, then rides merrily away—whither?

"Where ignorance is bliss," etc. etc., we all know the ironical proverb. How few of us realise the *mercy* which our ignorance has been to us, the agony which *wisdom*—the wisdom here alluded to—must have entailed?

It was not to another love young Aubrey was riding away from his beautiful "queen of heaven"; he had no faintest thought of wronging her, she held his entire heart (such as it was!), and was certainly henceforth to be "the one woman in the world to him." Yet the last smile with which he had answered her tender adieux had scarcely died upon his finely curved lips,

ere it was succeeded by a look of utter despondency, a helpless drooping of the eyelids, a pained spasmodic contraction of the handsome brow, and a wild wrenching of the horse's bridle, which only a most apathetic brute would have submitted to without instant retaliation in form of rear or back jump.

"If the old vulture will only give me time—just a little time!" groaned Aubrey, and was startled by the audible sound of the words he had unconsciously spoken aloud. Certainty, however distressing, is said, in all cases, to be preferable to doubt.

Young Aubrey, having ascertained that "the old vulture would *not* give him time," wished himself back again at that period of his ride in which he still had dared to lay "some flattering unction of hope to his soul."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

Now that he had confronted the implacable money-lender, in whose clutches he found himself writhing hopelessly, hopelessly—life looked him very blackly in the face.

"Guardie will be perfectly satisfied, believe me, if I can assure him you have *no* debts; that I am quite sure of. I know his views so well."

Thus Juno — straightforward, right-minded Juno—had spoken to him but a few hours ago; and then she had leant

across the pommel of her saddle, and in her clear, penetrating voice, had added with emphasis, "You don't owe anybody any money, do you Aubrey?"

And he, inwardly quaking the while with a double fear—of which the possible loss of *her*, whose love he had but just been assured of, was paramount—he had striven to steady his voice, and—had lied.

Foolish, shortsighted youth! How little he understood the breadth of Juno's character; how mistaken was this cautious policy of his! Even Alan Gwynne could but have respected Aubrey, had he honestly declared that he was hampered by certain gambling debts, and by a long overdue account to Hoof and Golong. On his twenty-fifth birthday he would come into his late mother's property, which would pay his present debts ten times over.

But Aubrey was naturally timid and weak, and Juno's emphatic declaration that her uncle would be perfectly satisfied if she could assure him of Alan's immunity from debt, had literally frightened the young man, whose leading idea from that moment became an intense desire to hide the fact of his owing a few hundred pounds from Maud herself, and from Maud's severe uncle.

If they should discover the true state of things now—now that he had actually lied to his proud love about it, he felt sure he never could expect to be forgiven.

In Churton dwelt—as is sure to be the case in any town where regiments are quartered—several more or less usurious specimens of the genus "money-lender."

Of the Hebrew antecedents of these gentlemen, or their pretty and playful ways with the young men who walked into their

various parlours, very little need be said here. Those stories have been told *ad nauseam* already by many abler pens, sketched from every point of view, too, rom the bitterly caustic to the highly-ludicrous; and again in the coolest prose and matter-of-fact detail of the newspapers and society journals of the day.

But neither fact nor fiction can more aptly illustrate the "tricks of the trade" than the old, old nursery rhyme yclept "the Spider and the Fly."

Poor Aubrey here truly played the vacillating part of the weak-minded fly; and Mr. Joshua Spooning quite as ably portrayed the craft of the blood-sucking, or shall we say, continuing the metaphor — the gold-sucking spider?

Mr. Spooning in looks was soft and sleek and insinuating; and his words, like his voice, were smooth and oleaginous.

Young Winton had first become acquainted with this fascinating "speculator" during the Autumn Race Meeting which made Churton so famous (some people even said, so *infamous*) during three weeks in every year. Jo, chaperoned by her brother, had attended these races on horseback, and distinguished herself so recklessly by the boldness of her horsemanship and her general demeanour, that she forfeited the acquaintance of the few county people who had still kept up a sort of fragmentary intercourse with the family at Winton Hall. Josephine had betted recklessly, and—won! Aubrey, fired by his sister's audacious example, had followed in her wake, and—lost!

Then Mr. Spooning, in the most obliging and thoroughly disinterested manner, most discreetly offered young Mr. Winton a little assistance.

From that day forth, poor Aubrey's hitherto untroubled existence was threatened with an ever-growing lowering cloud of doubt, distrust, and debt.

During the halcyon days of his new sweet dream of love, the black shadow had been partially ignored, or dismissed from his thoughts with a curse or a groan, as the case might be; but to-day, within the very hour that assured his future happiness with Maud, a letter was put into his hand which threatened him (reluctantly, and most politely, of course!) with "immediate proceedings," unless at least half the sum due to Mr. Spooning was paid forthwith.

Aubrey was driven at bay. He never had the slightest notion of business matters, avowedly possessing "no head for figures," and the rate of interest charged *as his due* by Mr. Joshua Spooning might have perplexed

the most experienced compiler of debit and credit account as "shent per shent."

Three months ago Aubrey would at once have taken himself and his monetary troubles to Jo, and found help and consolation in her sound matter-of-fact advice, but since Maud had appeared upon the scene, and Aubrey's allegiance in that quarter became manifest, Jo had withdrawn herself from all familiar intercourse with her "infatuated brother"; and he, inclined to follow Maud's lead in all matters, had naturally held aloof from "noisy Jo," as Maud so evidently did, though she never mentioned his sister's name to him at all. Now, in his hour of need, Aubrey felt utterly friendless and forsaken, for he dared not in any case have mooted the subject of his money troubles on the very day on which his lately ratified engagement to "the heiress," would have given Josephine a valid excuse

for the taunts and gibes in which her bitter tongue delighted to give vent to the ever smouldering anger growing within her envious breast.

The long lonely ride home after his interview with Mr. Spooning, and the charming welcome Maud gave him as he dismounted, all tended to calm Aubrey's excited and exaggerated views of his troubles and responsibilities.

He certainly had been forced to avert the pressing evil Mr. Spooning's "peremptory measures" threatened, by a fresh promise and renewed liabilities,—but what of that?

All he now required was a temporary loan from some obliging friend—the loan of £200 and odd. This (as a sop to Cerberus, or like a midge to the ravenous spiders) must be offered within three weeks of the present date; and then *time* would be granted for the

further settlement of all affairs between himself and the Usurer.

Aubrey felt that, after all, he was not so badly off, now that the "Spider" had granted him another reprieve, as when he rode away to Churton that morning, very doubtful as to the possibility of averting the harsh measures he believed Mr. Spooning quite capable of indulging in when he was in any sense balked by an impecunious client.

"How long you have been, Aubrey! Do you know it is nearly six o'clock?" said Maud with the tenderest concern in her voice and her eyes.

"You beautiful queen!" cried he, as he leapt from his saddle and chivalrously bowed over her long fair hands.

"Have you done your aunt's bidding, and secured the dancing-recruits?" she said, quickly disengaging her hands; but, after a

hasty glance towards the house, she bent her tall head down so that her lips met his.

* * * *

It was but a very vague movement, and yet from her, hitherto so proud and haughty in her reserve, it conveyed the frankest possible avowal of trust and tenderness.

Aubrey's face flushed and he trembled in every limb. Alas! that he should have had to tell this trusting, glorious woman—a lie!

She must *never* discover that cowardly untruth of his. By fair means or foul, he would possess himself, within the given space of three weeks, of such money as would silence the lips of the usurer, the only being who could prove that Aubrey spoke falsely when he declared himself free from debt.

If all other chances failed him, he must discount the future, draw on his prospects,

or on the chance of his father's death. . . . Meanwhile, brooding thus, Aubrey stood lost in thought, and for the moment absolutely oblivious of the gracious presence of Maud herself.

"And pray, my truant knight, where is your courtesy and your devotion?" she exclaimed, having watched his dreamy, far-away gaze in anxious silence for a time. "What may all this grave thought portend? Have you left your heart behind you on this three hours' ride?"

She spoke half reproachfully, but with a pretty petulance of tone and manner which he found most bewitching.

"You saucy enchantress," he cried, with laughing delight, "how could I leave a heart by the roadside which you took into your own safe keeping this morning, and which I am never likely to have the charge of again—am I?"

"That depends entirely on your own conduct and deserts," she said with a gesture of defiance; "and now pray give an account of the success of your mission among the men you have induced to enlist as dancing recruits."

"Three men of the 200th are coming for certain," he said, having taken care to call at the barracks in quest of them, "and two other decent fellows, sons of our bankers in Churton. I think my aunt ought to be pleased with the success of my mission; and you—how have *you* been getting on, my queen?"

"Take my arm," she said with a smile, "and while we walk along the shrubbery, I'll tell you." He laid his hand upon her arm, and they walked away together.

"I am wondering how it was I never dared to speak about my love to you until

to-day, Juno, and what it was that suddenly inspired me with the requisite courage this morning?"

He spoke quite seriously, and evidently felt that *she* could satisfy him on this point, as he believed she could on every other.

She accepted the challenge, serious on her part also.

"Distrust of yourself and of me has kept you silent hitherto," she said, and after a pause she added,

"But a sudden and generous impulse led you to trust to me and to speak out.

"Having once done this, and with such signal success, you'll never keep anything back from me any more, will you, Aubrey?

"Henceforth you will trust me thoroughly, entirely, and without any kind of reservation in all things?"

"In—all—things!" he repeated, in an odd broken voice, and wondered secretly what she would say to him if he were at once to make *all* things known to her. Indeed he really felt as if he must confide in her *now*, and confess the story of the debts which harassed him, and his fear of speaking the truth this morning.

But her next words (now unconsciously on her part!) checked the full and free avowal as it came to his lips.

She had noticed the change in his voice, and attributed it to a very different perplexity on his part.

"You think I ought to prove that I deserve your confidence before claiming it, don't you, Aubrey?"

He, really at a loss as to her meaning, contented himself with silence, but he drew her arm closer to him.

"You want to know about Guardie, of course?" she continued.

"I have made it all quite right—I assured him you had *no debts*, and said you preferred to discuss all the wretched business part of our future with him in your father's presence.

"That was at my second—my *commercial* interview with Guardie; the first was before you left, but that was mostly sentimental, so I did not choose to report progress until everything had been satisfactorily settled. Of course, Guardie could not have *interfered*, but he might have been *less* nice, instead of *more*, which he has proved himself. Another cheering communication I have to impart, dear Aubrey," she continued gaily, "is the fact that perfect peace is restored once again in the hall of your ancestors.

"Josephine and Guardie have 'made it up,' like a couple of well-behaved children, and our sweet Nora has recovered her colour and her smile!"

"For all which blessings my Juno's gracious name be praised!" cried Aubrey extravagantly, and as he seated himself by his love's side on the rustic bench in an arbour, he sent black care to the winds with a muttered curse as motive power, and sagely determined to allow himself at least twenty-four hours' peaceful happiness before he resumed those wearing and depressing thoughts and anxieties about how and where he could manage to obtain the £200, which certainly *must* be forthcoming within three weeks of that day.

To apply to his father just now, was of course out of the question, for the old gentleman's wrath would indeed be terrible, if he

discovered that Aubrey had actually "disgraced himself and his family!" (this was the father's way of putting it) "by mixing himself up with money lenders, the most despicable class of thieves that walk about unhung!"

These being avowedly Mr. Winton's opinions, Aubrey was perhaps justified in shrinking from a confession which would evidently "lead to a row," a state of things most urgently to be deprecated at present on account of the Gwynne's and the proposed ball.

Ah! well, thought Aubrey, pulling himself together with a defiant shake and shrug —"I *will* not trouble about this miserable business any more until to-morrow. Sufficient—and indeed far more than sufficien unto the day is the evil thereof."

CHAPTER X.

ONLY A LITTLE FLOWER.

THE 16th June was the day fixed for the ball at Winton Hall.

Since the "rollicking times" of the old squire—Aubrey's grandfather—no such preparations for gay festivities had ever been seen at the quaint old Hall, as those which now turned the house "topsy-turvy," sent the servants and their newly secured and numerous aides-de-camp skirmishing, and transformed the dim old library and its adjoining "Gallery" into a slippery-floored dancing-room, and a lavishly arranged buffet.

Mr. Winton, having once been really aroused from his habitual careless indifference, seemed perfectly ready now to acquiesce in all the lavish schemes his sister declared as absolutely "necessary under the circumstances."

That "the circumstances" were eminently satisfactory, even Mr. Winton was forced to admit; for it certainly did seem to him like a turn of his d—d bad luck, to have his two favourite children mate with such distinguished and wealthy persons as Alan and Maud Gwynne.

These auspicious marriages would reinstate the neglected family at the Hall, so thoroughly in the public estimation of the county generally, that its head—Mr. Winton himself—could once more meet his neighbours with the proud consciousness that his

position was quite as influential a one as theirs.

A petty ambition possibly, but the like of it influences the *tenue* of society and, like every impulse towards moral elevation, is bound to have beneficial results sooner or later.

A band had been specially engaged to come over from Churton, and the one confectioner of that flourishing little town had been charged to "do his utmost" for the glory of the Hall, in the extraordinary care he was entreated to bestow upon the supper, and especially upon "the ices."

Nora and Josephine drove over to Churton together charged with the tremendous importance of that freezing detail, on which, according to the girls' own opinion, the success of the evening mainly depended.

"The ices are far more important than the

wine, you know, Mr. Smith," gentle Nora ventured to explain to the "Chef."

"All the ladies care most about is nice ice, it's so refreshing on hot summer nights; and if the ladies are pleased, of course the gentlemen must be so likewise."

Nora blushed profusely and looked charming as she made this very feeble attempt at a joke.

Poor little Nora! these were wondrously happy days for her, and life itself seemed to have been metamorphosed from a "*triste réalité*" — a perpetual battling against adverse circumstances and inharmonious surroundings — to the blessed peace and constant joy of pleasantest intercourse with most congenial souls.

* * * *

Father, aunt, sister, and brother, all now seemed willing and eager to spare no

effort which could make the evening of the 16th an epoch of thorough enjoyment to all concerned.

No wonder Nora was the busiest, the brightest, and the gayest of all the gay home party on this auspicious occasion.

Mrs. Crawford gave orders that instead of luncheon, dinner would be served at 2 o'clock on the 16th; and a very pleasant midday meal it was.

The general confusion of the domestic part of the establishment turned the dining-room into an appropriate scene for an indoor pic-nic—the meats where cold, the plates few in number, and neither salt nor sifted sugar could be obtained from any of the hurrying agitated servants.

Then the young men, who were staying at the Hall, determined to come to the rescue, and craving Mrs. Crawford's leave,

dismissed the flurried attendants, and themselves undertook the pleasant task of waiting upon the ladies.

Alan Gwynne, in the best possible spirits, thoroughly entered into the fun of this impromptu farce, and, to every one's surprise and amusement, volunteered to head the new batch of domestics, as the sprightliest of major-domos.

Neither Nora nor Jo had ever seen the grave Alan unbend in this way before, and Jo, on the whole, was not thoroughly pleased to behold the hero she had chosen to set upon a pedestal of dignity "making a mountebank of himself."

"It is like a certain tragedian I once saw in town dancing a hornpipe in Hamlet's suit;" this was Josephine's whispered comment to her happy sister, who only recognised her Alan's lovable disposition in these funny freaks of his.

Maud had heard the comments of both sisters, and said in brief reply to Josephine's tragic allusion—

"The actor you mean desired to prove the versatility of his genius to an admiring public; Guardie is not acting, he is behaving as his happy mood prompts him, because he feels at his ease among friends."

Mr. Gwynne, like all mock-waiters, had been most assiduous in the brandishing of the serviette, the insignia of office, which he carried under his arm. Once, having left his useful article by the side of a lady, whose plate he had most demonstratively and most unnecessarily been dusting, he paused, at a loss.

"Lend me a serviette, Aubrey, for pity's sake, or I shall lose my situation," he cried, trying to seize the linen flag Aubrey was

now brandishing in the the true spirit of flattery—imitation.

But Aubrey, in excellent spirits himself for the nonce, rebelled and cried "No! You just keep your fingers to yourself, young man;" and as he spoke he seized the white tip of Mr. Gwynne's handkerchief, which was protruding from the breast-pocket of his coat.

Aubrey pulled, and dragged forth not only the handkerchief but also a very bulky pocket-book, which fell upon the floor, disgorging its contents in its downfall.

"A Crœsus indeed!" cried Aubrey, laughing as he hastily gathered up the bank notes which lay scattered upon the floor.

"Thanks, thanks," whispered Alan, a little confused by this unintentional display of

the money intended to pay for a gift to Nora on the morrow.

"I forgot to lock the notes up; the gong sounded while I was changing my coat. I'll put them by now—please make my excuses if I'm missed," he added hurriedly to Aubrey, and was about to leave the room; but as he reached the door Josephine touched his arm—

"You have lost your head, to-day, Alan," she whispered, with what she meant to be an arch glance; "you *think* you've lost your heart. Would it not be wise to guard against losing your money too?"

The ladies had all risen by this time, and Josephine, the first to move from the table, had been the only spectator of that hurried encounter between Alan Gwynne and her brother.

Alan, irritated far more than the occasion warranted, now hurried away, and Josephine, exulting in the home-thrust she fully believed she had just dealt her much-admired adversary, made her way to the billiard-room, whither the young men speedily followed her.

Maud and Nora, good helpful girls both, put themselves under Mrs. Crawford's orders, and strove, with a very good will and immediately apparent results, to be of use to that most indefatigable lady.

Nora was so busy that she had no time to look after Alan, though she missed the sight of his beloved face during the long afternoon, and often crept to the window, hoping to have a glimpse of him in the garden below or to hear the sound of his voice in the shrubberies or meadows adjoining.

But Alan had joined Mr. Winton in his

retreat in the study, and was humouring the old gentleman by entering into a very argumentative political discussion with him.

The épergne and dessert-dishes all being daintily arranged to Mrs. Crawford's perfect satisfaction, the two useful girls now set about filling every available glass and vase and jug with cut flowers.

"We'll make the rooms look perfectly lovely, won't we, Maud?" said Nora gleefully; and when she had duly carried out her part of the programme, she crept away to the conservatory and cut the only lily of the valley left there—the last blossom on her favourite plant—the one she particularly desired Alan to wear to-night, since her own white dress had been trimmed with similar flowers by the London dressmaker.

* * * *

It was nearly seven o'clock when Nora,

with a beating heart, the lily and some maiden-hair fern, made up into a buttonhole, in her hand, sought Alan, anxious to give him his decoration for the night. But Alan was not to be found in house or grounds, and his valet, whom Nora met in the hall, informed her that his master had gone into the village with Mr. Winton.

Nora stood for a moment irresolute, she would so have liked to give Alan the flower herself, and now she had lost the chance, for it was time she went to dress herself, and when next she met her lover it would be in the reception-room, and in the presence of strangers.

The valet had gone his leisurely way towards the servants' hall. Alan was out, she would run up into his room and place the buttonhole on his dressing-table. He would know well enough who had put it there for him.

With hasty steps she ran up towards the spare room, and with a shrinking feeling that was almost like apprehension, entered Alan's chamber.

She left the door ajar, and, still timid, approached the dressing-table. Alas! there was neither glass nor vase for her lily; but on the mantelshelf stood a specimen tube—the very thing. To pour water into it was the work of an instant, but just as she was about to place it on the table she heard a footstep close to the door. His valet, of course; and he would find her in his master's room! Too hurried to argue the point with herself, Nora acted on the impulse natural to a girl under the circumstances, and sought to hide herself.

In wild haste she crept into the sheltering folds of the curtains, and was screening herself in one of them when the intruder

entered the room, but with so stealthy and shrinking a step that Nora paused to see who this might be.

Peeping between the folds of the curtain, she descried Aubrey advancing with noiseless footfall, and watched him as he stealthily, fearfully crossed the room and approached the table which stood in its centre.

* * * *

There was something—something terrible in his white face—which held her, trembling herself now with an undefinable apprehension, spellbound.

She did not stay to think, to *realize*. She could only watch in mute but ever-growing horror.

* * * *

Aubrey took a bunch of keys from his pocket, and setting up the despatch-box which lay on the table before him, he fitted

one key after another. At last one went home into the lock.

Nora, really dumb with amazement now, could not have uttered word or cry had she tried, but she was beyond the moment when speech might have been a relief. She could only *watch.*

* * * *

She saw her brother clutching a handful of bank-notes. She could hear the crisp crackling of the paper as he crunched them into a bundle, and then she watched him thrust them into the breast-pocket of his coat.

* * * *

Now a door was sharply closed at the end of the corridor. In an instant Aubrey had flung down the lid of the box, the lock of which was a self-closing one, and rushed from the room.

She, sick, faint, and trembling, but watchful still, could not hear his departing tread. He had found shelter in the adjoining room, but she knew that those footsteps which were approaching from the far end of the corridor, were Alan Gwynne's.

Escape was impossible for her now, for even had she wished to fly she knew her shivering limbs would refuse to bear her.

With an overwhelming feeling of aching faintness she tried to move towards the door, steadying herself by the table as she went, and suddenly pausing, with a smothered cry of anguish, as Alan, entering, spread out his arms to receive her, and in happy surprise exclaimed,

"My darling, I have been searching for you everywhere!"

She was safe in the shelter of his dear strong arms for the moment, and with a

desperate effort she determined to control herself.

"I came—to bring you—only—a little flower," she stammered; "but I'm tired. I've been so busy all the afternoon, and now, now— I must hasten to dress."

Thus far she had been able to hide her face in his breast, and now, as she was compelled to lift it, she felt that she dared not meet his anxious, questioning gaze, so without a further word, but carried onward by her fears, as though they were wings, she sped from the room and away.

Alan stood lost in wonder. Never before had Nora appeared to him scared and shrinking and terrified like this.

What could it mean?

Had any one been playing practical jokes on his tender little love?

Josephine was fond of horse-play of all

kinds, and she had left him with a sort of menace. But Nora said something about "a little flower she had brought him."

Ah! there lay the flower, ruthlessly trodden under foot, close to the centre table.

Poor little Nora! *He* had startled her himself, of course, tramping along the corridor with his heavy boots, when she had wanted to creep from his room unobserved. Dear, timid, gentle little maiden that she was! Forced to content himself for the present with these vague solutions of Nora's enigmatical conduct, Alan summoned his servant and hurriedly commenced his toilet, desperately anxious to meet Nora again, to ascertain the cause of her alarm, and, if necessary, to fight her battles for her, even if "brazen Jo" were to be his adversary.

At all events he would be able to comfort and reassure that most loving and gentle of

women, whom he longed to carry away from her present uncongenial surroundings, and to establish as the happy mistress of his own peaceful home.

* * * *

With a face as white as the lilies upon her dress, poor Nora, timidly sheltering herself behind the ample proportions of Queen Juno, crept into the ball-room.

But Alan, who was on the look-out for his poor little love, instantly made his way to her side.

"You are not well, my darling!" he whispered hurriedly, and his keen anxiety betrayed itself in his eyes and his tone.

"She has a racking headache, poor child!" said Maud promptly. "She has been over-exerting herself for every one's benefit all the afternoon, and now she is knocked up of course."

"I fear I startled you, as I came up so noisily—you dear considerate little woman!" Alan continued in his lowest and tenderest tones, and as he spoke he managed to clasp her small ungloved hand in his. But this surreptitious caress, instead of comforting Nora, only served to alarm Alan himself. "You are ill, child!" he cried—"your hand is as cold as ice."

"My head aches. I don't feel well," she murmured pitifully, and added, with what sounded to him like an earnest appeal, as indeed it was—

"Pray, pray don't take any notice of all this; I can't dance, but if you say nothing no one else will remark my absence, and presently I can creep away to my room unobserved."

Maud, who was preoccupied by a growing anxiety about "Adonis," had not heard

the whispered colloquy between Nora and her lover, but now suddenly turned towards Mr. Gwynne, and with ill-concealed impatience demanded—

"Can *you* tell me anything about Aubrey? —not a creature seems to have seen him since luncheon time."

"You did not inquire in the proper quarter, Maud!" interrupted Josephine in her high shrill tone.

"Was he with you, then?" asked Maud, evidently relieved.

"Yes; we've been having a quiet gamble in my own den!" answered Josephine, but, becoming aware of her aunt's vicinity, dropped her voice to a more subdued key.

"We were turned out of the billiard-room by the maids, so we adjourned to my private apartments, and had a glorious fling there."

Noting the cool displeasure in Alan's

averted face, Josephine was instantly provoked to open defiance—

"We were not playing for love, you know, Mr. Gwynne; that is a harmless amusement best left to school-girls and prigs," she said, by way of explanation, but seeing that he did not even wince under the would-be cruel irony of her words, she resolved to *shock* him into some sort of response.

"We were going in for a regular smasher at shilling Napoleon," she continued, laughing aloud at the pleasing recollection.

"And was Aubrey with you then?" asked Maud, mentally resolving to read her truant lover a mild little lecture when next they should meet.

"With us?" repeated Josephine, with a spice of malice in her tone. "Indeed he was, and playing fast and furiously too. The proverb about 'Malheureux au jeu,

heureux en amour' has certainly proved true in the case of my little brother. But, take his sister's advice, my dear Maud; make him *very* unhappy—and soon too,—or your joint purse will have to be an inexhaustible one."

Maud as usual, when Josephine sought to lead her on to battle, took refuge in dignified silence, and to see the gentle smile of undisturbed content upon her lips was a more exasperating punishment to her irate adversary, than any spoken words could have been.

Nora meanwhile had crept close to her lover's side again, and now whispered hurriedly,

"Good-night, dear Alan; please forgive me for running away."

As she spoke she saw the first batch of visitors arriving at the principal entrance,

where Mrs. Crawford was prepared to receive them, rustling in brocaded importance.

Nora hastened to avail herself of the chance thus afforded to her, and swiftly made her escape through the small further door at the other end of the ball-room.

She sped upstairs, and, breathless, hurried towards her brother's room. But before she reached the door, he had opened it, and now stepped forth—not "booted and spurred withal"—but *certes* in "brave apparel, a comely and a goodly youth to look upon." Nora, gazing upon him through the pained and troubled light of her most humiliating discovery, saw neither his comeliness nor his brave apparel; to her he was not *goodly* but *guilty*, as she looked upon him, and with a pang of additional repugnance she noted that he held a magnificent bouquet of rare

hot-house flowers, and that it was fastened into a jewelled filigree holder.

Whose money had paid for that costly trifle?

"Why, little Nora, what are you doing up here?" he inquired with a pleasant smile; and as she did not reply, but only looked straight into his clear blue eyes, the light in hers all dim and troubled, he added, advancing a step nearer to her—

"Are you ill, little lady? You look awfully seedy; is that why you are not dancing?—the first waltz is on, by Jove—my queen will be angry. I must be off." As he spoke he was passing his sister, and already hastening towards the stairs.

"Stay, Aubrey," whispered Nora, now again trembling in every limb; "I must speak to you before you go away to dance!"

Her voice and face, unknown to herself, became severe, almost menacing.

"Don't be a fool, Nora," he answered hurriedly; "this is no time for play-acting; let me go on. I shall get into trouble with Maud."

"Come back into your room with me, Aubrey," insisted Nora. "Worse trouble than dear Maud's anger is coming to you. I sought for you everywhere three hours ago, but you had already *gone*—gone to Churton, I suppose, to buy those flowers for poor Maud . . . and . . . *if she knew* . . ."

A horrible fear possessed the young man.

Mechanically he turned and followed his sister back into the room in which he had just before been casting such satisfied glances into the looking-glass—the glass which now mirrored his white, haggard face as his

eyes unconsciously peered into its depths again, and with a movement of horror he shrank away from the altered vision which now confronted him there.

* * * *

Nora, who was physically as much as mentally affected by the horrible nature of the charge she was about to bring against her brother, felt that her limbs would soon refuse to bear her in an upright position; so, all shivering and trembling, she sank down in the chair nearest her, and without losing any time in useless preamble, she, striving to steady her voice, said—"I saw you steal that money out of Mr. Gwynne's despatch box, Aubrey. God knows I was no willing witness to my brother's crime. I hurried after you too, as soon as I had fully realised the enormity of your action, but already you were *gone*—"

He stood transfixed, and her voice, which she had so earnestly desired to steady, broke into a sob as she pitifully added,

"Oh! tell me that I can restore the money to Alan *now*. I will tell him *I* took and that *I* restore it, and he will pity—but perhaps—some day—forgive me!'

"You're a brick, Nora," said Aubrey hoarsely; "and what *I* am won't avail me to confess, or you to listen to.

"That I am a coward and—and—a thief I know, and so do you; and that I have paid away two hundred pounds to save myself from the rows at home, and the disgrace of being discovered to have had dealings with Joshua Spooning, the governor's most loathsome enemy—I tell you now. At the same time I throw myself and all my hopes of future peace and happiness in humble supplication at your feet."

He suited the action to the words as he spoke, and grovelled on the floor at her feet, hiding his face in the folds of her dress, and writhing in his agony.

"There is but one thing you can do, Aubrey," said Nora quietly and not unkindly; "you must go to Alan Gwynne, make full and free confession to him, tell him you will demand the two hundred pounds from father at once, and restore them to their owner.

"Alan is noble and generous, considerate, and truly kind. If you confess all the circumstances unreservedly to him, your temptation, your wicked yielding, and how and why, he will listen to you patiently and make every possible allowance for you. Indeed I feel that, perhaps for my sake," here sobs checked the poor girl's utterance for a moment, "or—or—even on account of

his good feeling towards you, and his affection for Maud."

"Ah! that's it," cried Aubrey, suddenly raising himself upon his knees, and looking into his sister's face with a terrible despair in his. "That's why I cannot, I CANNOT confess; it's for Maud's sake, my proud, my beautiful, lovely and lovable queen!"

"She loves you, and would forgive you and help you in all things, if only you strove to do right, Aubrey," said Nora, decisively.

"Ah! you don't know her," cried he; "you don't know how she despises lies and deceit and treachery; you, feeling that though I am a lost wretch I am your brother still, don't utterly shrink from and despise me, you would even help me if you could."

"Indeed, yes," sobbed poor Nora.

"But Maud would recoil from me as one

utterly loathsome and despicable, and neither tears nor protestations, nor even a life of penance and expiation, could ever bring me within the pale of her forgiveness or of her countenance again." He spoke with a sense of desperate conviction.

There was a hurried tap at the door of Aubrey's room.

He opened it hastily. The servant handed him two notes and disappeared.

The first was from his aunt.

"You are causing a perfect scandal by your absence. Nora, the little idiot, has declared herself too ill to appear. The whole thing a dead failure, of course."

"Come instantly.

"I. C.

"N. B. Your father is furious."

The smaller note was from Maud—

"Come at once, and you may yet hope to be forgiven. In any case I shall demand an ample apology and a satisfactory account of your inconsiderate conduct.

M. G."

CHAPTER XI.

WOULD YOU HAVE TRUSTED HER?

At eleven o'clock the brilliancy of the ball at Winton Hall, which, according to Mrs. Crawford's lugubrious prognostications, was to prove a "dead failure," was at its height.

The rooms, which were lofty and large, though well filled, were by no means inconveniently crowded; and the dancers, as is mostly the case in the country, where social gatherings are rare, and therefore so delightful,—all had a happy look of keen enjoyment on their faces, very different

from the *blasé* and utterly *ennuyé* expression so characteristic of the denizens of London ball-rooms.

Josephine was bolder than ever to-night, and certainly looked her "brazen best," as Alan Gwynne ironically admitted to Maud, in her training gown of a crass yellow hue, a tint well adapted to her dark skin, her black eyes, and blacker hair.

"Young Blythe," a "thorough good fellow," as all who knew him admitted, and as "Jo" had declared a hundred times during the last fortnight in which he had been her most constant and most attentive companion, had evidently been impressed by quite other attributes in the elegantly-dressed Miss Winton, who waltzed "a doosid sight better than any other girl within ten miles of Churton," than by her skill at billiards and in horsemanship.

Indeed young Blythe, and he was a *very* young man, had hitherto looked upon Jo as "a thorough good fellow" herself; and in speaking of her, thought he paid her the greatest possible compliment in asserting that she was A. 1 upon the spot stroke and winning hazard.

"I don't know the fellow who'd beat her, by Jove!"—Blythe concluded his gallant tribute to the bold black-eyed girl, who to-night had made him forget even her prowess at billiards (his favourite occupation) in her perfect waltzing.

It was the first occasion on which it had ever entered young Blythe's head that "Jo," unsurpassed as a partner in manly sports, might make a very desirable partner for life, as Mrs. Blythe.

And, in the pauses of the dulcet strains of the 'Schönen Blauen Donau,' the ad-

venturous blonde youth told "dear Jo" that such was his conviction, and Jo, a little, not much surprised, but most decidedly elated, said she thought they would manage to pull together very tidily in double harness. "Taking the good with the bad, you know, Bertie," she whispered behind her fan, and in an impressive tone added,

"You go and tackle my governor directly after breakfast to-morrow morning, and make him do something handsome in the way of settlement, he *can*, you know, but he must be brought to reason, for he's old and obstinate."

"My *expectations* will fetch him, I hope," cried young Blythe with a peal of light-hearted laughter that would have done credit to a happy school-boy.

Nora was in the ball-room too—her

headache was better, she told Alan in answer to his tenderly anxious inquiries; and, having resolved to make a desperate effort, she was now desperately determined to carry out her resolution unflinchingly. Maud and Alan must both be spared all knowledge of the crushing disgrace which had suddenly fallen upon *her* sweet dreams of peace and happiness, making both the present and the future hideous, unendurable; and presenting life itself as a gloomily threatening necessity from which escape, alas! was impossible.

So, with the strength of true heroism, gentle Nora took the burden of the secret, and the fatal consequences of her brother's guilt on to her own frail shoulders; and, however mistakenly, yet surely in honest good faith, resolved to screen her brother as far as it lay in her power—not only for

his own miserable sake, but far more out of consideration for Alan and Maud, who were dearer to her now than her own kith and kin. They should, they *must* in any case be spared the painful humiliation of knowing that Aubrey—*her* brother—was—a thief!

Poor Nora!—it was neither with a light heart nor with willing feet she finally consented to do Alan's bidding, and actually "took a turn" with him.

"For the last time perhaps—perhaps," sang the small voice of sorrowful presentiment within her, attuning the words to the dulcet strain of that same waltz which had just accompanied her sister's triumph, and young Blythe's mental hymn of thanksgiving.

"For the last time perhaps—perhaps," sang that sad little voice in Nora's breast,

making a melancholy second to the gay strains of the band.

"Dancing with you again, my darling, reminds me of the old happy days at the sea-side," he said, pressing her slender form closely with his strong protecting arm—to the delicious power of which she so gladly yielded herself.

"Do you remember those blessed days when we loved to be together, and yet scarcely realized that we loved one another best of all?"

Did she remember? was she ever likely to forget any one of those delightful hours spent in his dear company, recollected now with that double intensity which lends a poignancy, that is almost pain already, to joys which, alas! we fear are but fleeting?

He loved her too well, and was far too thoroughly acquainted with all her ways

and all her changes of mood and feeling, to be deceived by her painfully simulated gaiety. He knew she was suffering, and told her so, but believing as he did, that there could not be a thought in her guileless mind which might trouble her and not be instantly confessed to him, he attributed the sad depression of her looks and bearing to a purely physical cause, a severe nervous headache, which was the natural result of the excitement and fatigue to which she had subjected herself all the long sultry afternoon.

It was so like her, he thought, praising her fervently at the same time, to try and dissemble, to talk and to laugh and to dance and to hide every outward indication of suffering, for *his* sake.

But she should not punish herself in her desire to gratify him, he would not prove

himself selfish and exacting, *because* she was yielding and devoted.

So he presently took her out into the cool conservatory, and, placing her on a seat, bid her rest there and talk to him, for there should be no more dancing or company-mannering for either of them that night. On that he was determined.

She, nothing loth to abandon herself still once more to the unalloyed delight of his presence, quietly seated herself, prepared to listen to his low, tender voice, and keenly sensitive to the thrill with which it seemed to play upon her over-sensitive nerves.

"You will be quite well again to-morrow, my darling?" said he anxiously. "Quite —quite yourself?"

"Of course," she answered with a reassuring smile, "why not?"

Why not, indeed?

As if to give her an undeniable reason, Maud entered the conservatory from the garden at this moment, closely followed by Aubrey, who, according to his regal mistress's peremptory order, was still carrying that magnificent bouquet of hers, as he had been made to carry it all the evening by way of expiation for his "late appearance and his melancholy face."

So she had said, scolding him and laughing too, but long after both the sharp words and the laughter were forgotten, she had still expected him to obey her original behest.

And he, always meekly obedient where she chose to command, was more meekly obedient than ever to-night, utterly cowed by the double knowledge of his guilt and the terrible dread of her displeasure. He glanced wistfully at Nora as he caught sight

of her engaged in confidential chat with Alan Gwynne.

She looked up as Maud and her brother entered the conservatory, and she met his pitiful, alarmed glance with a quiet indifference in hers which reassured even while it chilled him.

She had resolved now to act a difficult part, and to bear the burden he had cast upon her slender shoulders to the end, no matter how painful and bitter that end might be.

But to endure bravely and in silence she must force herself to wear a mask of indifference to all outsiders, and, what was far more difficult, to school all her tender girlish impulses, to curb and control them by the aid of that cruel rod known as callousness.

Aubrey saw this calm resolve and the

visible effect of it in Nora's bearing already, and with a sort of mental shiver—if such an expression may be pardoned—he began to realise the bitter consequences his guilt might bring on others who were wholly innocent.

"So glad you are better, you poor, dear, indefatigable old pet," said Maud, giving Nora a kindly smile as she passed, and then, turning towards her uncle, she added,

"She still looks very pale and weary, Guardie; pray don't allow her to over-fatigue herself."

"I am seriously thinking of sending her to her bed this minute," said Mr. Gwynne, and very soon after poor Nora, sick at heart and tired as she felt, thankfully allowed herself to be dismissed.

But her simple "good-night" to her

anxious lover seemed to her utterly inadequate as they parted, the haunting dread of what the morrow *might* bring was ever present to her, and every moment she now spent with Alan was doubly and trebly precious, overcast as it seemed to her with the black and heavy clouds of probable future estrangement.

Alan had been watching her white, weary face with intense commiseration as these thoughts, speeding through her brain, left their harrowing traces upon her fair young brow.

He held her hands clasped in his and was thus gazing down upon her, his kind grey eyes expressing the deep tenderness he felt towards this sensitive, delicate little creature, whose life must surely be a struggle, spent as it was among relatives who certainly were quite unable to appreciate

the true refinement of the dainty flower which had sprung up among them so lightly tended, so little cared for.

"You promised to be quite yourself to-morrow, Nora, did you not?" he repeated presently, as a certain recollection crossed his brain.

"Quite—certainly," said she, and succeeded in giving him the reassuring smile for which she knew he was looking.

"I am going to buy you something to-morrow, something for *my* wife," he said in his tenderest tones. "And she shall go over to Churton with me and choose it for herself. I'll order the dog-cart at eleven, and then we can be back to luncheon without disturbing Aunt Isabel or Mr. Winton. Will that suit, my darling?"

"Whatever you like, Alan," she answered hurriedly and coldly, and with a

hasty whispered "good-night" left him, a little hurt and very much surprised.

* * * *

Once safe in her room and alone—"Alone at last, thank God!" as she cried with a sob that was half a prayer, and overwhelmed by the sense of her utter helplessness in the misery she felt coming threateningly nearer and nearer now, she knelt by her bedside, sobbing bitterly; and as her hot tears abated she found a sudden grateful comfort in broken, stammering phrases and entreaties, which, all unskilled and unpremeditated as they were, yet were prayers and heartfelt ones, such earnest prayers as never could be learnt or said by rote—such prayers as we have reason to believe go straight to that Throne to which we, sinful and sorrowing as we are, dare cling, pleading for and trusting in the gentle Power of an Infinite Mercy.

* * * *

Nora awoke early next morning, and before she had opened her eyes, she felt that sorrow—some undefined and yet terrible *sorrow* was by her bedside still—where it had kept its dark and stealthy watch all through the hours of the short summer night, troubling her dreams by a pained consciousness, which now, that she freed herself from the toils of sleep, started up and confronted her, making her heart shrink within her, and causing her to whisper—

"*What* is it?"

Ah! she remembered it all too soon; and long before she had aroused herself sufficiently to open her windows wide and inhale the first fresh breeze of the sweet summer morning, that indefinable and haunting sorrow of the night had made itself thoroughly known to her memory

again in all its crude and miserable details.

She knew that Alan had settled to drive her over to Churton soon after breakfast; she knew that he meant to buy her some costly gift; she knew that it was with that purpose he had had money sent him in a registered letter a few days since. A letter, he had said, came from his agent,—alas! and alas! though no one had told her, she knew all this—and more,—but over that pregnant *more*—the future, the vague unknown—had still mercifully cast its hiding veil. With a feeling that was absolute relief, she felt that she might withdraw in grateful ignorance so far, of what might or might not happen in the coming hours.

Jo's was decidedly the happiest-looking face at the family breakfast-table, for though young Blythe as usual refrained from

presenting himself at so "unearthly matutinal an hour as ten o'clock, don't you know?" Jo looked quite beaming in the proudly conscious anticipation of that coming hour in which a certain preliminary interview with "the governor" would put her "engagement" on a properly formal footing, and entitle her to as much consideration and as many privileges in the house as "that chit Nora" had much disgusted her by receiving during the last half-year.

How this glad news would affect Alan Gwynne was a source of much and varied cogitation to Josephine. At times she felt that it was hardly fair on her part to debar him of all hope of winning her ultimately, by allowing him to see that she had plighted her troth to another.

And that other was one whom she knew Alan Gwynne depised—that probably was

the result of instinctive jealousy on his part, thought Josephine, and as she so thought she gave a bold yet deprecating glance to Alan, who, preoccupied and worried as he was this morning, so angrily resented this *impertinence* of the brazen girl's, that he could scarcely refrain from publicly denouncing her.

Denouncing her? and for what? Good heavens! and she was Nora's sister, and he firmly believed that she had— No! it was too horrible; and neither her ogling, her amicable advances, her loud voice, her coarse laugh, her slang or her gambling, had in any sense prepared him for *this*. Well, she should have the benefit of the doubt at present, thought Alan, in his turn schooling himself to appear callous and indifferent. She should have whatever benefit he could give her now, and all possible

clemency after. Not for her own sake? Oh! no—nor because she was a woman.

She was too anxious herself to have her sex and its claims on forbearance ignored, for him to force the recollection of her womanhood upon her.

Thus Alan Gwynne moodily reflected, breaking his toast and sipping his tea with the air of a man most unpleasantly preoccupied.

"Is it love or speculation that weighs upon his mind?" thought Josephine, who was always on the alert for any passing sign of emotion on Alan's part. Nora had watched him also, and read the signs of the coming storm in the brooding listlessness of his bearing, and the perturbed glance of his usually clear steady eyes.

As she rose from the breakast-table Alan came over to her and said hurriedly—

"We must put off our drive to Churton until this afternoon, little love; something unforeseen has happened. I have a little matter of business to discuss with you and your sister and brother. Will you join us in my dressing-room? We shall be secure from interruption there; and my business is strictly private.

"I will look after Aubrey; what a lazy fellow he is! Maud must teach him better manners, and you will bring Josephine; don't fail me at eleven."

Thus spoke Alan; and his voice and his manner plainly betrayed the anxiety from which he was suffering.

Nora bitterly realised that even the relief of any outward expression of her internal misery must not be granted to her now, and fearing to hear the sound of her own voice, which she knew would assuredly

tremble, she bent her head in silent acquiescence to her lover's command.

Josephine was decidedly unwilling to yield to Nora's earnest entreaty. "I have other and far more important fish to fry," she said crossly, "than to dance about the house at Mr. Gwynne's arbitrary beck and call;" and, after a reflective pause, she added, "What in the name of wonder can he want me for?"

"He said *business*," answered Nora quietly.

"And do you mean to say that's all you know, and that you contented yourself without making any further inquiries?"

"That is all he told me, and of course I asked no questions when I saw he did not desire to give any explanation."

"Oh! what a silly-nilly you really are, Nora!" cried Josephine in a tone of im-

patient disdain. "You'll make but a poor business of matrimony I'm thinking.

"At all events you shall have the benefit of your sister's successful example before you. I mean to *manage* my husband,—I don't object to the 'owner and slave' system, you know, and think it may very likely conduce to conjugal peace,—only in that case I'm not the one to act as slavey, of course.

"That pleasing part of the domestic drama I should certainly hand over unreservedly to, —shall I tell you to whom, Nora?"

"Just as you please, Jo," said Nora absently. Indeed, poor child, she had very little notion of what her sister had been talking about.

Her startled glance had fallen on the clock, and it wanted but five minutes to the hour.

"Let us go at once, Jo," she said nervously;

and Josephine considerably puzzled by her sister's anxious manner, and her own curiosity as to what Alan could possibly have to say on matters of "private business," led the way upstairs, singing the refrain of a famous or (infamous ?) *chanson* of Thérèse's, in which Jo managed to imitate the *rauque* tones of that manly *chanteuse* to perfection.

Alan Gwynne heard the distasteful sounds as the girls approached his room, and felt with a sickening sense of disgust, that the task of gentle courtesy and consideration he had set himself would strain his powers of self-control to the utmost.

* * * *

Aubrey was standing at the open window when his sisters entered the dressing-room.

Nora cast a hurried glance through the door which led into the adjoining room—the scene of that terrible watching of hers

yesterday; only yesterday?—why, it seemed as if that misery had been endured weeks, instead of hours ago. Indeed the knowledge of it had already so sobered and aged poor Nora that she felt she should never smile—never sing—never be young again. From that open doorway, which Alan had hastily closed, Nora now glanced at her brother, remembering how awful he had looked, as with trembling fingers and dilated eyes he had committed that odious theft.

And as she so thought, recalling every incident of that shameful and most humiliating scene, a sudden wonder possessed her at the remembrance of her remaining hidden, a passive spectator, an unmoved witness of her brother's crime. Of what avail that she had sought him afterwards?

What purpose was served by her upbraid-

ing in the evening—when the money had all been carried away—disposed of elsewhere?

Nora, condemning herself in no measured terms for her unaccountable conduct, was quite unaware that the horror which filled her mind had physically paralysed her, and that she could have taken no immediate action, even had she felt the instant necessity for it then, as she certainly did now.

She was so absorbed in these troubled reflections, that she had completely forgotten her present surroundings, and the pending interview to which she had been summoned.

But when Mr. Gwynne suddenly addressed himself to Aubrey and his sisters, praying them to be seated and to pardon his troubling them at all in a matter, in an unpleasant matter, Nora started out of her troubled reverie, and listened with the utmost atten-

tion to every word that fell from her lover's rigid lips.

He told them that he had been robbed, that from his despatch box, in which he had locked up £200 in Bank of England notes yesterday, the money destined to pay for a present he wished to offer to Nora had been taken. He left the dining-room, where he had carelessly let the notes fall upon the floor, in order to put them under lock and key at once.

"You will probably both remember the incident," he said, looking from Josephine to Aubrey, who bowed their heads in assent, though neither spoke.

"Josephine spoke to me at the time with impressive words, which have since seemed to me to have a ring of prophecy in them," continued Alan, addressing himself to his listeners generally, but keeping a close watch on Josephine's face as he spoke.

"She said that I had evidently lost my head and heart, and cautioned me against losing my money too!

"Do you remember using words to that effect?" he asked appealing to Jo, who met his inquiring eyes defiantly as she said,

"I do remember talking some such nonsense, because I felt provoked—no matter how and why. I dare say you had no particular desire to annoy me, but I was annoyed; and the fact of your tossing all those bank-notes about on the floor, to show us of how little account you considered hundreds of pounds, seemed to me a covert insult to our poverty-stricken household; and I hated you for this bragging display, and wished—yes, I did wish—you might be punished by losing the money you were so ostentatiously careless of."

She spoke quickly and angrily; but, suddenly altering her tone to one of contrition, added,

"Now I most acutely regret my unfriendly desires, and would give a great deal never to have indulged in such ungenerous thoughts; and more still to have been spared the punishment of knowing that such ill-luck has befallen you—and in our house, too!"

"She lies uncommonly like truth," thought Alan, savagely compressing his lips, and added mentally, "This seems to be Jo's crowning accomplishment."

More than ever anxious now to spare the others, if not Josephine herself, as far as he possibly could, he continued impressively—

"I think you will all understand my motive in asking for this private interview.

It was to lay my case before you, and to listen to any advice or suggestions you may choose to offer, and which will spare me the pain of mentioning this vexatious affair to either your aunt or your father."

"But I am decidedly of opinion that it must be mentioned to the governor immediately, and properly investigated too," said Josephine in her most decided tone. "This is a matter which concerns the honour of all of us far too nearly to admit of its being slurred over," she added; and, noticing the unresponsive silence in which Nora and Aubrey received her energetic remarks, she cried, "You two, don't stand there like dummies; isn't there a spark of right feeling under either of your pale faces?"

"It is truly considerate of Alan to appeal to *us*," said Nora quietly; "and for my part I am deeply sensible of his desire to save

father the pain and scandal which such a revelation must bring about."

"The house was topsy-turvy yesterday, and so many strange servants were running wild all over the place," remarked Aubrey weakly; but then Aubrey was always considered weak and vacillating, and his feeble speech produced very little impression.

"If it had been a strange servant who was bent on robbery, he or she would have carried off the despatch-box bodily," said Josephine promptly; "this is not the theft of a stranger or a servant—of that I am persuaded. I'm bound to say so, and must not mind how hard a thing it is to avow—it's my conviction."

Alan listened to the girl in wonder that was mingled with awe.

If she had committed this theft—and at this time he suspected her only—then she

certainly was the most consummate hypocrite whom he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

Her next remark, keen and thoroughly *à propos* as it was, startled him not a little.

"Have you done nothing since first you discovered your loss, Alan?"

"Nothing," said he; "what could I do until I had consulted you?"

"Plenty," answered Josephine. "In the first place you should have telegraphed—as you must do now—to stop the notes."

Taken off his guard, Alan answered promptly, "But I never took the numbers. This will be a lesson to me, and I deserve some punishment for my gross carelessness."

Josephine's face denoted surprise—perhaps reproach—that was all; but into Nora's hitherto impassive countenance came a gleam that was *relief*. Yes; Alan in-

stinctively described the look to himself by that word, and the quick sigh of one who has cast off some burden, either mental or physical, was all in keeping with that sudden and utterly unlooked-for change in Nora's sad but tranquil face. . . . .

Now Alan was staggered indeed, and that whole scene of yesterday—her ashen face, her trembling words, her incoherent speech, the vague excuse of "Only a little flower," —and that flower trampled under foot. . .

"Good God!" cried Alan in a sudden, horrible paroxysm, that made him feel as if he were losing his reason.

He buried his face in his hands and reeled like one staggering after a cruel blow, which has stunned, though not felled him.

Had any one, even at that supreme moment, asked him a point-blank question about his suspicion, and demanded to know

if he thought Nora capable of committing a crime, he would most indignantly and most emphatically have denied such a possibility; and yet he felt, instinctively perhaps, but none the less vehemently, that Nora had some knowledge—some guilty knowledge—of this matter, and that conviction alone gave him a far keener pang than he would have deemed possible.

Nora—gentle, loving, tender-hearted Nora—had thoroughly entwined herself in the most sensitive fibres of his being. To be obliged to connect her, however vaguely, with any thought of wrong or deceit was like the severing of his very heart-strings.

She, with all her efforts at self-control and apparent indifference, could not but note, with a sudden shock, the change in *his* manner to her. It was neither his speech nor his look which conveyed the intimation

that he had just undergone some newly painful experience, but a subtle and undefinable sympathy thrilled poor Nora with a fresh and bitter uneasiness. What thought had disturbed him?—on whose head had his suspicion flashed now?

Impossible to judge from his pale, stern face, or from his next quiet words—

"I feel that there is nothing to be done at present. I do not choose to make any further disturbance; I heartily wish I had been *absolutely silent* as it is. I can only beg your pardon—all of you—for so needlessly distressing you; and—Nora—you look pale, my child, take a turn in the garden with me; we must disperse these cobwebs."

They went forth into the garden together—side by side—her hand resting lightly upon his arm.

He had quietly taken possession of the small cold fingers, which, in spite of the abundant summer heat, lay chilled and lifeless upon the sleeve of his coat.

She truly felt that an awful crisis in her fate was at hand, and the very life-blood in her veins seemed frozen by the undefined but surely threatening prospect of the coming hour.

Alan watched her still, white face, her faltering steps, and irresolute manner, and the fear that she was in some way, however indirectly, compromised, became a cruel certainty, as he noted the startling change in her looks and manner.

Still, he had but to question her he thought; and then, without any further hesitation, she would relieve all his vague anxiety by confiding the truth to him, without reserve.

She knew that she could trust him, and

she must be sure that if Josephine had taken that wretched money, he would be the first to desire the matter should be dropped without any further investigation, since thus his poor little love would be saved from more pain and anxiety than this bad business had already caused her.

His momentary harshness had fled with the cold manner he assumed, while the first shock of his interview with the sisters had seemingly paralysed him. At this moment he only longed to hear the truth from his dear tender little love's lips, so that he might reassure her and bring a smile and some of the pretty colour back into her wan face.

He was a proud man, and in any case he must feel deeply hurt by this occurrence; still, for Nora's sake, he would get over even this bitter humiliation, content that

she and he together could and would always and fitly support the fine old family motto, "Sans tache," the integrity of which he was proudly desirous to maintain. He led her on into a cosy summer-house, over the thatched roof of which clustering honeysuckle and starry jessamine clambered in delicious profusion, while scented trails depended from the straw border and fell in lovely tendrils on to the head of all who entered, as Nora and Alan now did.

Instinctively he broke a spray of jessamine and handed it to Nora as she seated herself; she took it in her hand, but did not, as was her wont, place it in her dress. She crushed it in her fingers and kept the bruised and fragile blossom thus. It might be the last time that Alan gave her a flower, she thought in her despair, and at the same moment Aubrey's last wildly-whispered

words recurred to her, which he had hurriedly spoken in her ear as he withdrew from her lover's room.

"If you betray me, I shall shoot myself," —that was what Aubrey had said to her, with that determination in his looks and manner which is the outcome of despair.

"Little Love," said Alan, seating himself by Nora's side, "something tells me that you have some knowledge of this miserable business, which so sadly perplexes us."

She started as though he had mentioned the thief by name.

"What you know and how and how much, I cannot imagine," he resumed, quietly and impressively, "nor will I seek to inquire. I only wish you to admit two facts, which I deem important. You know who took the notes?"

Not a word in reply.

"I shall take that silence of yours as acquiescence," he said decisively; and there was a look of disappointment on his face as he spoke.

Nora was silent still, her hands were clasped and rested in her lap. The little bruised spray of jessamine lay closely imprisoned within those ice-cold fingers, which must have crushed all life out of the flowers long ago.

"You love me, Nora, and you are in trouble. The weight of this secret is more than you can bear, my poor child; let me share it with you. Of course it is a very terrible thing for you to have to confess, since some one you desire to screen must be implicated; still you owe it to yourself and to me, to tell me the whole truth. I do believe you can safely trust my discretion, and that you may be sure I shall take no

step whatever in the matter, without your fully expressed concurrence or desire."

She still sat silent, motionless. He, stung by her seeming indifference to his earnest appeal, now threw himself on the ground at her feet.

"Nora, my darling, you *must* speak, you must tell me all," he cried passionately. "We could not live with a secret—such a secret dividing us. You must prove your confidence, your faith, your thorough reliance in me, your *husband*. Nora! you must tell me the truth, and give me the right to help you out of a dark dilemma, which is more than your pure little soul can struggle through unaided. Nora, will you tell me all?"

He paused, breathless, his eyes full of a keen anxiety fixed with intense eagerness upon her.

"I cannot tell you, Alan," she said.

He started up.

"I will allow you to leave the name of the guilty person unspoken," he said, impressively still, but without the latent tenderness in look and tone which had hitherto characterized him. "I only ask you, and on this I *must* insist, to tell me that that money has been taken with an object of which I should not disapprove, were I aware of it; that some special motive prompted the deed, we can take for granted. Was the motive one I should sanction?"

"I cannot tell you, Alan," she said at last, in a low, broken tone that fell on his expectant ear like a sob.

"Nora!" he cried, "for pity's sake confide in me. I swear to you by all I hold most sacred, that I will do nothing, say nothing further in this matter—*nothing*; you

hear?—if only you will confide in me, will let me take the burden of this guilty knowledge from you—and then, as soon as may be, carry you yourself away from such despicable, degrading surroundings."

He had seized her hands and was wringing them in his terrible and growing anxiety. "You have nothing to fear, child; no one shall know, no one shall ever suspect that *I* know; but for the sake of our future peace and happiness, I must know *all*, and from you, my child, who, by some miserable chance are already in possession of this horrid secret."

"I cannot tell you, Alan," she said; and as she spoke, she seemed once more to hear her brother's suppressed but none the less despairing cry—"If you betray me, I shall shoot myself."

The maddening echo of that frantic

appeal resounded in her brain, rendering her deaf and callous to the pleading of her lover and the peril of her own future interest and happiness.

Indeed, she had long since determined to ignore herself entirely in this matter, and realized that the time to put her resolution to the test had now arrived.

For Maud's proud and dear sake, and for that of her weak erring brother, Nora was bent on sacrificing herself utterly; and instinct taught her that the most effectual mode of accomplishing this Herculean task of self-abnegation was by avoiding all chance of argument, and adhering strictly to the one formula of speech, which must effectually screen Aubrey, and save her from complicating matters in any way.

Thus resolved—Nora had but one reply

to all Alan's tender coaxing, alarmed, and finally threatening appeals—

"I cannot tell you, Alan."

Indeed she could tell him *nothing*, and the chance he gave her when he asked her simply to reassure him concerning the proper use of the stolen money, was *no* chance to her, for she could not conscientiously declare that paying Mr. Spooning was a desirable method of investing £200; and unlike Jo, Nora was quite unpractised in the *perversion* of the truth which is the daily practice of the many who, shrinking in horror from a lie, are yet ready and willing to hedge themselves in with a tottering fence of "fibs and quibbles" where truth shows herself in a threatening aspect.

Since his searching, mortifying, and most unsatisfactory interview with Nora, the

old conviction of Josephine's guilt, of her complicity in the theft at least, had returned to Alan with redoubled force.

During his anxious talk with Nora, he had forgotten the vivid impression Josephine's ingenuous manner had made upon him an hour before; and if in his present miserable mood it occurred to him at all, it was with a lurid flash of doubt and distrust, which utterly perverted its meaning, and now seemed, instead of innocence, to point only to guilt, and guilt of the most loathsome description, since it proved its crafty experience by masking its treachery under the proud *insouciance* of perfect freedom from evil thoughts or suspicion.

Alan had to exert his self-control to the utmost to avoid denouncing Josephine by

name. *That* test he knew Nora must succumb to, and perhaps it was this conviction which silenced him. She should prove her trust in him by confiding the name of the thief — a name she had not denied she knew.

If once he could break down the barrier of shame and distrust which now forced his poor little love to a stubborn silence, as foreign to her yielding gentle character, as it was trying to his love and his pride, all might yet be well with them, but if she did not choose . . . .

Even in his secret thoughts Alan could not bring himself to anticipate so terrible a calamity. What chance of future happiness could possibly be in store for Nora and him, if they were to commence their married life divided by a guilty secret—a secret, the burden of which was already

setting its mark of pain and shame on Nora's sweet young face, untroubled hitherto by any but the most lightly fleeting clouds of some passing domestic anxiety. When last she had repeated that inflexible resolve of hers, "I cannot tell you, Alan," she had fixed her eyes steadfastly upon his face, and she had noted, with a sense of repression within herself that amounted to a physical pain, that all the tenderness had fled from his eyes and his voice, and that he had—perhaps unconsciously on his own part—withdrawn the hand which had rested on hers throughout this torturing interview.

With an involuntary shudder she now rose, and crushing the small dead flower convulsively in her clenched hand, she confronted her lover and said in a low, calm voice, the steadiness of which amazed her as she heard it—

"And now, Alan, you and I must part."

"You mean that?" he cried hoarsely.

"There is no other course possible for you, or for me——"

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed, "and you—*you*, Nora—can bring yourself to say this to me, and for the sake of saving your bold, bad sister from the disgrace she so thoroughly merits? Indeed, it is not worthy of you, *for you are sacrificing me* ruthlessly, and this surely I have not deserved at your hands?"

She heard him; but only the words he so passionately emphasized reached her perturbed understanding. That he connected Josephine with the theft did not occur to her at the moment; but that she was sacrificing *him*.

"There shall be no chance of any fur-

ther sacrifice, Alan," she said; "and, therefore, again—we must part! God bless you, Alan! Trust me if you can; and now—farewell!"

She did not venture to look at him now, nor even to offer him her little hand in token of farewell. She had quietly moved to the exit of the summer-house, where the sweet-scented creepers hung in clusters from the low thatched roof, and there stood as she invoked a blessing on the lover she was leaving.

She did not turn her head again, or say a further word, but she walked quietly away up the path and towards the house; and, having reached her own little chamber, she locked herself in with her sorrow.

CHAPTER XII.

A CRUEL TIME.

It is winter now, the ground is frozen, the horses' iron hoofs as they come trotting over the hard high-road send forth a metallic clang, that in itself suggests a shiver to those who hear it.

There are not many horses passing along the frozen roads this bitter December night; and yet a lonely watcher is eagerly listening for the sound of wheels and of horses' feet which will slacken speed as they approach Winton Hall.

The quaint old dining-room looks almost weird, its black oak furniture dimly lighted by the flickering logs in the wide old-fashioned fireplace. The heavy curtains are closely drawn over the windows, but Nora in her eagerness has separated two, and now stands between them, her head bent towards the frosted panes in an attitude of listening attention. Six months have passed since that terrible summer's day when she and Alan parted.

Six months of constantly wearing pain and anxiety, which have left indelible marks upon the delicate little face. It looks pinched and wan now, even to the once pouting lips. They are always compressed now, as though to give her secret misery no chance of escape in words.

Only the clear blue eyes seem unchanged, if the troubled shadow which darkens them

at this moment may be accounted for by the varying light of the oddly flickering flames. Sometimes they leap up in wild radiance, and then they die a sudden death in utter darkness.

Poor Nora! life itself seems to be utterly dark to her now; and she has not even a gleam of hope left to relieve the black misery of her prospect.

Nora had certainly suffered, and suffered acutely.

There was the bitter pain of the loss of her lover, but that she knew was inevitable, a part of the burden she had undertaken to carry, and which she bore bravely.

But after Alan had gone, and she expected to be left to mourn in peace, a new trial awaited her, which the girl felt it doubly hard to endure in patience and with-

out complaint—since she was utterly unprepared for it.

No sooner had Mr. Gwynne definitively taken his leave of Winton Hall, than Nora's father, her aunt, and her sister too, commenced to torment the unfortunate girl with ceaseless questions and keen reproaches.

Josephine in her own mind found a ready solution for Alan's eccentric conduct, in the fact of her engagement to a hated rival; and having arrived at this (to her) probable and satisfactory conclusion, she soon desisted from further questioning unfortunate Nora on a subject which "that poor child could not be expected to understand or explain."

The mysterious disappearance of the £200 troubled Josephine very little; and since Mr. Gwynne desired to hush the matter up, why, it was not her place to

make a noise about it. So Josephine declared to Aubrey, who quite approved of her discretion.

Then followed Nora's rupture with her betrothed, and the formal engagement of Mr. Blythe and Miss Winton; all of which engrossing themes distracted Jo's attention from less important ones.

Aunt Isabel, in a perfect fury of excitement, which a sudden anxiety on behalf of her dear Aubrey's prospects rendered quite maniacal, rushed to her brother and worked him up to such a fine pitch of indignation that he actually *insisted* upon an interview with Mr. Gwynne, as soon as that gentleman had declared his intention of summarily departing with his niece and ward.

Mr. Winton on this momentous occasion assumed the very novel *rôle* of "the injured and indignant parent," and in a string of

fine though incoherent phrases began by upbraiding, and then appealed to Mr. Gwynne on behalf of that delicate, blighted, disappointed little treasure, his youngest —his darling daughter.

To all of which rhodomontade Mr. Gwynne quietly but decisively replied by a simple statement of facts.

"It is your daughter's express desire that we should part, at once and for ever, Mr. Winton," said poor Alan, and added, with some natural bitterness, "You will assuredly grant, Mr. Winton, that in this case *I* am the person most injured, and possibly deserving of some consideration and pity."

"I must talk to the wrongheaded minx myself," Mr. Winton answered rashly, forgetting all the hints of "diplomacy" and "*ménagement*" with which his manœu-

vring sister had so profusely coached him for this very critical interview.

"If Nora sees any reason to change her decision, I pray that she—or you—will write to me." Thus Alan had spoken as he made his farewell bow, and then his ward and he had been driven away.

Mr. Winton, roused to hot haste himself, at last, now sent for the 'wrongheaded minx,' Nora, and without wasting any time in parley, overwhelmed the poor child with a torrent of angry indignation.

Exasperated by her silence and apparent indifference, the "injured parent" next descended to a style of personal invective and abuse, which, in all her poignant misery, almost brought a pitiful smile to poor Nora's lips, so cruelly like Josephine did her father appear in this wild outburst of temper.

Perfect silence was the only rock against

which Jo's violence was ever known to beat itself into a state of quiescent exhaustion; and in perfect silence Nora now endured her father's wild wrath.

He, driven at bay by this utterly unexpected *wicked* obstinacy on gentle Nora's part, finally informed his sister that he had done with that ungrateful, ungracious, and most undutiful baggage, and he now left her and her high and mighty lover too to Isabel's tender mercies.

But Aunt Isabel, though both anxious and excited, chiefly on Aubrey's account, was far too skilful a general to precipitate matters by undue haste; and, instead of storming at her unhappy niece, she for the time contented herself with exhaustive inquiries as to "how" and "why" Alan had been dismissed, and finding that no response was forthcoming, resolved to bide her time.

But never a day, and scarcely an hour, passed without a repetition of those wearying and unanswerable questions; and Nora felt herself haunted, nagged at, and worried, —a misery to herself and those about her.

Thus the unsatisfactory days wore on dismally enough, and a whole month had passed since Maud and Alan drove away together; Maud, hurt and estranged by Nora's utterly incomprehensible conduct, Alan as silent and quite as unhappy as the poor girl 'he left behind him.'

Neither the pang of parting nor the subsequent misery of violence, reproaches, and nagging, told upon Nora so cruelly as her own perpetual and wearying reflections.

She surely had been right; she was certainly most unselfish in considering her brother's peace and happiness before her

own, but was she as surely justified in sacrificing Alan's prospects of happiness for Aubrey's sake?

That was the haunting question which constantly perplexed her; and which, though it occurred to her again and again, she was totally unable to answer to her own satisfaction.

Her most pressing anxiety, once Alan had left, was to get that stolen money restored to him as speedily as possible.

She knew that she herself could not hope, on any pretext whatever, to get a penny from her father, whose furious disappointment with his refractory daughter had by no means abated.

But help came to her from a most unexpected quarter.

Aubrey, who, though weak to a fault, was not vicious by nature, had watched

his patiently enduring little sister, and was moved to a sense of tender compassion by the uncomplaining misery which she was suffering for *his* sake.

He was fully aware that his cowardly act had destroyed her one great chance of happiness, and he roused himself to make such effort as he could towards restoring her peace of mind in some degree.

A chance word of hers betrayed her leading anxiety to him, and he now determined to allay that and at once, by a speedy restoration of the stolen money.

His Aunt Isabel, whose lately aroused hopes of a brighter future for them all, had been sadly troubled by the inexplicable breach of Nora's engagement, was now inclined, by a sudden revulsion of feeling, to doubt the fruition of any of the matri-

monial schemes so tenderly hatched under her talented supervision.

She said many a dubious word about Maud, whose absence made the old lady very anxious, and sneered incredulously whenever the future *ménage* of the intending Mrs. Blythe was under discussion.

To poor Aunt Isabel, all trembling as she was for the future prospects of her "one dear child," that dear child (Aubrey) now came with a stringent and utterly unexpected demand for money. And so cleverly did this ingenuous youth work upon the anxious lady's feelings, her doubts, and her fears, that he actually obtained a solemn promise from her, a promise to the effect that she would, "Heaven only knew how," procure the enormous sum for him which he declared as absolutely indispensable before he could

depart for Dashshire and persuade Maud to fix the wedding-day.

The sum Aubrey demanded was £300; and he certainly managed to impress the dire strait in which he found himself so effectually upon his really alarmed aunt, who may even have had some latent suspicion in her mind as to that mysterious robbery of which Josephine had casually informed her, that she certainly determined the money he declared necessary for his matrimonial success should be forthcoming. And it was.

By what shifts and contrivances she raised the sum, Aubrey neither knew nor cared.

He was quite satisfied when he held the notes in his hand, the possession of the smaller part of which would finally free him from the tenacious fangs of that

gold-sucking spider, while the greater sum would prove to poor sad little Nora that he truly desired to make her burden lighter for her.

With trembling fingers he made the notes up into a parcel, while Nora stood watching, silent, breathless.

He had written upon a slip of paper in printed characters,

"*Restitution, in repentance,*" and this he enclosed in the parcel.

He had held up the legend for his sister's inspection, and she had read it, but made no comment.

He wrote the address in a stiff reversed hand, utterly dissimilar to the smooth, slanting style he usually affected, and he glanced at his sister again to see if she approved. She was still watching him, but neither moved nor spoke.

The last seal was carefully impressed, the last knot tied, and the parcel was ready to go.

"How shall it be sent?" asked Aubrey, embarrassed by the inflexible vigilance of Nora's steadfast gaze.

"It must be posted in London," she said briefly.

"But who can take it?" he asked.

"Dare I trust *you?*" she inquired in her turn, and saw him flinch under the taunting question, as though she had cut him with a whip.

In her embittered mood, it was almost a satisfaction to her to know that her words had struck home. She began to feel that it was just others should suffer sometimes, and that she too could punish.

Aubrey was very humble as he said,

"If you *will* trust me, Nora, I will do whatever you bid me, absolutely."

Then, in concise, practical terms she gave him his directions, with an accuracy of detail which perplexed as much as it amazed him.

"Why, little sister, you are getting to be as wise and far sighted as Juno herself," he said, smiling as he paid this tribute to the once meek and gentle girl whom he now found so changed, so hard.

But she never relaxed the rigid muscles about those lips which, but a very short time ago, had been ever ready to dimple with smiling prettiness.

Two days after this interview with his sister, Aubrey had settled to leave for Dashshire; but on the intervening day he went up to London to do her bidding.

She alone knew his real destination; at home he had only mentioned that he meant

to spend his last day visiting old chums in Churton.

And when Nora knew that the money was on its road to Gwynne Castle, she felt as if that crushing burden of hers was not quite so terrible to bear at last.

Aubrey set forth in the best possible spirits.

In the first place, he felt thoroughly satisfied with himself, and seemed convinced that the restitution of the money he had "temporarily abstracted" (this was the ingenious way in which Aubrey chose to designate the theft) quite absolved him from any further responsibility in the matter, and certainly lifted him beyond either fear or reproach.

"Shall I write to you, Nora, if I hear any news to interest you?" he asked, as he stood in the verandah buttoning his glove.

"No," said Nora, "nothing interests me now."

"Have you no message for Juno?" he asked again, reluctant to leave her so sad, when he was going to be made the "happiest of men."

"I have had a letter from Maud this morning," said Nora, "but I have no reply to send her."

"Oh! what does she write to *you* about?" asked Aubrey, flushing hotly. "I expected a letter from her and none came."

"You will see her to-night," said Nora, and handed him Maud's letter without any further comment.

The part that had most affected Nora in the epistle, and which Aubrey also read with the deepest interest, referred to "Guardie."

"He has been very much upset," wrote

Maud, "by the arrival of a packet of money from London, of which he was robbed in some bygone time. I know none of the particulars, but was very much troubled to see poor dear Guardie looking so harassed when I rode over to the Castle yesterday. I have never known anything affect him so much before, always excepting your cruel and most unaccountable dismissal, you erratic but most wilful of little women. Oh! Nora, how could you be so changeable, so cruel? I really believe it is only for my Aubrey's sake, and because through him we shall be made *sisters*, that I still virtuously keep up my part of our correspondence; as for you, I leave you to fight out the dilatory nature of your replies with your own conscience. Nothing can excuse your leaving me for weeks, aye months, without news; for you have

plenty of time, and you must know that there is another heart in Dashshire which beats in ceaseless anxiety when I am likely to get any news from you. *He* loves you as tenderly, as devotedly as ever, Nora; and it needs but a welcoming word from you to bridge over the cruel chasm now severing you from the man whom I know you still truly love, however appearances seem to belie you.

"The crayon portrait of your dear little head hangs in Guardie's study, over his writing-table still, and he has written this legend under it—

"'Trust me.'

"One day we were both looking at your innocent little face, and Guardie said,

"'She looks as though one *might* trust her, doesn't she?'

"His voice trembled as he spoke, and when I glanced at him there was something very like tears glistening in his eyes; but they met mine, and he turned on his heel, and that is the only time you have been mentioned between us. . . . Next week Aubrey comes! Then follows our wedding!

"And, oh! even that will be robbed of half its glory, since my own particular friend, the *only* bridesmaid whose support I wished for, will be conspicuous by her absence.

"Guardie suggested that he would go abroad for awhile, and so remove the stumbling block (this is *his* expression, not mine) to your appearance.

"That I knew could not be acceptable either to you or any one else concerned.

"Now I suppose we must content ourselves with a vast deal of ceremony, plenty

of acquaintances, no real enjoyment, and no true friends."

* * * *

And thus it was the wedding of Miss Gwynne, the handsome heiress, with Aubrey Winton, Esq., took place.

All possible concessions were made to "the pomps and vanities of this wicked world," of the observances of which county society is even more tenacious and exacting than the busier denizens of the metropolis.

Mr. Winton, always in a far more accommodating mood as guest than as host, made himself as agreeable as it was in his nature to do; and going over Gwynne Castle, was once again filled with a poignant regret that Nora had let so promising a chance slip through her weak little fingers.

Mrs. Crawford, whose brocades rustled

more portentously than ever on this auspicious occasion, realised that so heedless a child as Nora, who, for some Quixotic motive which she was herself ashamed or afraid to confess or explain, could throw over the owner of Gwynne Castle, deserved no further countenance or support from her family!

If Nora was aware of any little peccadillo of poor dear Aubrey's, it was her bounden duty to hush it up, of course. But that duty, according to Mrs. Crawford's private opinion, would have been far more effectually and delicately performed if Nora had managed the whole affair absolutely *sub rosâ*.

Since the silly girl had sacrificed her own chances of future aggrandisement through her mismanagement of her brother's "little difficulties," no one could attempt to be of any further use to her.

Thus argued Aunt Isabel, who really knew nothing of the facts of the robbery at Winton Hall, etc., but who preferred arranging the hints and details, Josephine had vouchsafed to give her, in such fashion as would redound to Aubrey's credit entirely; while the sequel of those mysterious events clearly proved that Nora must have been very much in the wrong, or certainly quite unable to look after her own interests, which deductions always appeared to astute Madam Isabel as synonymous.

It was with a sigh of profound relief, that Mr. Gwynne heard from Aubrey, that Josephine's engagement, which had brought all sorts of new claims and ties on her time and attention in its train, would compel that devoted young lady to remain in Brighton at the time of her brother's wedding.

"She's nursing young Blythe's old aunt, from whom he has such great expectations," Aubrey explained, laughing, as he presented his sister's apologies.

For all Mr. Gwynne cared, Josephine might have been nursing a dozen relations, provided only she kept away, and neither required Mrs. Elmore nor himself to receive her as an "honoured" guest.

Time, which is supposed to mellow us, had only served to harden Mr. Gwynne as far as bold brazen Jo was concerned; and when, late in the autumn, he heard that young Blythe had for ever merged his insignificant identity in the self-asserting importance of a wife, and that wife the late energetic Miss Winton, Alan shook his head, and sincerely commiserated that most unfortunate harmless young Bertie who, for his own part, considered himself "quite the luckiest of men."

Maud and her husband had gone abroad after their wedding, and spent the autumn in Switzerland. Mr. and Mrs. Blythe met them in Paris, and there the two couples remained for a couple of months, the ladies fortunately finding one another very much improved by their short experience of matrimony.

In Paris they were both equally on the alert to watch over and protect their young husbands, whom they evidently considered as requiring a vast amount of constant personal supervision.

This quasi maternal element in the affection of the brides, gave their personal intercourse a subtle link, which had been utterly wanting in the summer days they had spent together in Winton Hall.

And during all these times of holiday making and general rejoicing, poor Nora

had remained at home alone with the old people, sad, quiet, utterly resigned, and never dreaming of protest or complaint.

It had been a terrible time, for all that, and as the girl stood anxiously listening by the frozen window this bitter December evening, she had reflected on her isolated misery during the past three months, and keenly felt how grateful she would be for any change which might quicken her pulses once again, and make her feel that she was still alive herself, though all else appeared like stagnation.

It was the expected arrival of Maud and Aubrey which had set Nora watching this evening, and filled her brain with stirring visions of some coming change in the dreary monotony of her existence.

The young couples had crossed the Chancel together, and Mr. and Mrs. Blythe

had proceeded to Brighton, whither their valetudinarian relative had imperatively summoned them. Maud and Aubrey meanwhile were to spend a week at Winton Hall before they proceeded to Dashshire.

Juno, glowing and tingling as she suddenly found herself in the warmly curtained room, and in the close embrace of her sister Nora, looked positively radiant to the wistfully observant eyes of our anxious little heroine.

It was the first time the girls had met since that abrupt and mysterious parting in the summer, of which poor Maud had never had any explanation beyond that cool statement of her uncle's, "It is Nora's wish we should part."

Now, Maud, thoroughly happy in her own marriage, and rendered more imperious than ever by the deferential homage her

adoring young husband bestowed upon her, had returned with a settled determination to sift that mysterious matter of Nora and Alan's parting, and to bring these two wantonly unhappy people together again, and secure their future bliss for them *nolens volens*.

When Nora first looked into her sister-in-law's proud happy face, and read the signs of perfect content in it, she forgot all her previous scruples and hesitations, and felt sure she had acted for the best in sacrificing herself for the sake of the peace and happiness of this bright, glorious creature.

"And if Alan could know the whole truth," thought the poor child, "I do believe that even he would approve of what I have done."

Nora, thoroughly grateful to find that Aubrey had so evidently secured his wife's

happiness, looked on her weak young brother with more encouragement and sympathy in her blue eyes than she had ever shown him since the night of the ball in the summer.

But he, after these months of absence, was painfully struck by the change in his poor little sister's appearance and manner.

She had grown pale and thin, and there was an air of painful preoccupation about her which augured but ill for her peace of mind.

And all this was his fault, thought Aubrey, with so keen a pang of self-accusation that the reproach of it left a sting which goaded him on to future action.

Nora had borne the burden of his guilt, and had suffered the most terrible punish-

ment in consequence, without a word, with scarce a look of complaint.

She had broken off her own marriage, dimmed all her prospects of a happy and brilliant future, for the sake of securing *his* wedded peace and repose.

For, Aubrey, after some months' intimate experience of his wife's proud character, was more than ever convinced that she would never have forgiven or forgotten the crime, the onus of which his gentle sister had now borne in her own person.

The constant companionship of a noble nature must sooner or later have beneficial results.

In the case of Maud and Aubrey, her admirable character was daily—aye, hourly—influencing and modelling his weak and vacillating, though assuredly not vicious nature.

And Maud's affectionate comments on the sad change in her poor dear little Nora's manner and appearance went home to Aubrey like so many keen personal reproaches.

Indeed, he was now haunted day and night by the ever-gnawing desire to make such atonement both to Nora and Alan as noble-minded Juno would have insisted on had she known anything of the shameful case.

Both Maud and Nora daily taught Aubrey, by the sheer force of their unconscious example, so practical a lesson of moral integrity and self-abnegation that Aubrey at last, realizing and ashamed of his moral cowardice, resolved to prove to himself, if to none other, that he also was capable of considerate thought and of self-sacrificing action.

All Maud's loving and most persistent

inquiries to glean some information from Nora anent her rupture with Alan proved utterly without avail, and Maud often and bitterly complained to her husband of this lack of confidence on Nora's part.

"I know I could make it quite right for both of them if only Nora would let me," cried Maud on one occasion, when she had been sympathetically comparing Aubrey's and her own happiness with the desolation and misery of the two people she loved best on earth (present company always excepted, of course!).

It was then that Aubrey, moved to a greater sense of compunction, resolved to take some action of his own in this difficult matter. "I almost think I can see my way towards reassuring their future peace," he ventured to assert, with a blush that would have done credit to a timid school-girl.

No wonder his wife regarded him in evident amazement.

How could he think of interfering where she acknowledged she had no chance herself?

"There is nothing else you could possibly do that would give me such intense happiness as the bringing of those two dear ones together again," she said, sparkling with the bright anticipation of such a possibility.

"If your happiness also is concerned, my beautiful queen, that settles the question for me, of course, and it now becomes my bounden duty to leave no effort unspared."

Maud looked at him with a flash of admiration in her eloquent eyes that might have spurred even a less devoted lover on to heroic deeds.

"You must be content to trust me, my darling," he said, with a certain boyish delight in the fact of his mysterious errand.

"I happen to be aware of the true cause of the estrangement between those two, but that is Nora's secret, and she would not wish me to divulge it. On that knowledge I build my hopes for their future reconciliation."

"And you purpose going to see Guardie on the subject?" asked Maud, thoroughly interested.

"Yes—but Nora must have no hint of my purpose."

"That of course. Will you go to-morrow?"

"All those details please settle for me, dearest," he said humbly, more touched than he cared to acknowledge by her unquestioning confidence in him. "If you will manage my departure from here without letting Aunt Iz. torment me with a thousand questions, or giving Nora

a hint as to my destination, you will again prove to me that you are the most discreet woman and the most admirable wife in all the world.

CHAPTER XIII.

ATONEMENT.

UNDER the double stimulant of her husband's praise and her own intense desire to help him whenever and wherever she could, Maud of course managed his unquestioned escape for him, admirably.

His anxious aunt and his indifferent sister were quite ready to believe that he was only going over to Churton for the day, to visit his former friends and haunts there, nor were they in the least surprised by his remaining away over

night, seeing that his wife was evidently quite prepared for this extension of his his leave of absence.

Alan Gwynne's first and very natural emotion at Aubrey's unexpected appearance at the Castle was one of alarm, and the forsaken lover's anxious thoughts flew towards his poor little Nora in sudden alarm, and then for a moment hovered with a different fear about Aubrey's wife.

The very mention of her name roused the young husband, reminding him instantly of the hard task he had set himself, and the fulfilment of which had now brought him into Alan Gwynne's presence.

It would be futile to dwell on the manner and method, or rather on the utter absence of all method, with which poor nervous abashed young Aubrey made his

pitiful confession to Alan Gwynne, who listened in awed silence to every word of the long story of wrong, deceit, and shame.

It was only when Aubrey dwelt with touching accuracy of detail on the magnitude of Nora's sacrifice, and on her perfectly uncomplaining self-abnegation, when he told of her altered appearance and saddened demeanour, that Alan burst forth into a wild protest in which even his compassion for his little love was flooded over by the torrent of indignation he could no longer suppress against the cold, cruel brother who could stand by and see his gentle sister thus victimised for his unmanly sake.

Aubrey, keenly alive now to his wrongs, and bitterly repentant for them, took all the anger heaped upon his meekly bent head as his due. He had but one protest, or rather one petition to make in his turn, and that

was to implore Alan to withhold the knowledge of his despicable cowardice from his proud, noble wife.

And this Alan Gwynne promised.

* * * *

"Nora!" cried Maud, entering her sister-in-law's little chamber early on the morning following Aubrey's visit to Gywnne Castle. "Nora! I want you to come into my sitting-room with me; I want to show you something."

Maud's face beamed with such irresistible gladness, that even serious Nora was moved to a gentle smile as she answered,

"I will come to you directly, dear," and as Maud went to the door, Nora added—"Has Aubrey come back?"

"Yes," said Maud, and hurried away.

Nora methodically gathered up the silks and wools which formed a part of the

elaborate work on which she was engaged, and with a little wonder as to what specially interesting object Maud had now discovered for her delectation, she went along the corridor, at the end of which the young Wintons apartments were situated. She opened the door of the "boudoir," specially fitted up for the bride's reception by considerate Aunt Isabel; and not at once perceiving Maud, whom she expected to find, was about to move towards the door of the adjoining room, when she perceived a figure—a figure, the sight of which made her heart and her pulses throb wildly, as it stood leaning against the frozen window panes, its back—the back she instantly recognized—turned towards her. She advanced a step, and then stood irresolute.

"Alan!" she said in a faint whisper.

And he turned suddenly upon her, and

in another moment was prostrate upon the floor, kissing the hem of her skirt, and praying for pity, for forgiveness, for the restoration of that precious love of hers which he had forfeited by his want of absolute trust in her.

"And it was all, all for the best on your part, you noble, admirable child," he cried, "and I was a suspicious, weak, miserable fool. Can you, will you forgive me, my own love, my best, most precious little love?"

"Trust me!" she said, and sealed that final appeal of hers with a long and loving kiss.

THE END.

THE ORDEAL OF FAY.

CHAPTER I.

SUNSHINE.

THE sun is setting, the shadows deepening, the evening cooling, and still I stand at the gate—watching. So have I watched for nearly an hour, and yet Charley does not come. Is he never coming?

The day has been long, close, weary. Oh! how I long to see the dear, handsome face again, and to hear the voice I love best! Into my expectant mind snatches of song come consolingly, and hummingly leave my

lips. I have apostrophized that dear old mighty man "the Village Blacksmith," as he stands at ease under the chestnut tree. His work, no doubt, must be over by this time, and I can picture him at the door of that famous smithy . . . . Presently it occurs to me that the musical echoes from an imaginary anvil are not nearly so appropriate to my present situation as the thrilling story of "The Beating of my own Heart," so with subdued pathos I set off and wander (vocally) "by the mill stream." The climax (on the last page of the song, as I well remember, for my enthusiastic rendering of it was spoilt once by a too officious leaf turning)—well, the climax rouses me, and with emotion I proceed to describe how "fast silent tears were flowing," etc. I begin to feel, indeed, as if *my* someone must "stand behind" after so pathetic an incan-

tation. But the lyric spell has no power; my someone comes not, lays no hand upon my shoulder . . . . A faint stirring in the branches of a tree overhead, as though the birds are trying to fly in their sleep, the lazy falling of a leaf carried by no breath of air, the distant tramp of a late workman stumping over the gravelled path on the common, those are the only sounds that break the silence that is becoming oppressive. I begin to feel impatient, perhaps even a little cross, and I let the gate swing to and fro between my hands as an accompaniment to my next very appropriate ballad, "Somebody's waiting for Somebody."

Ah! how true. Isn't there always somebody waiting, all the world over? often enough in vain! Is it not also true that those most anxiously waited for are often the longest in coming?

So thinking, the very desire to sing has died within me. I am walking outwards with the gate, letting it swing no more, for darkness is creeping on, and why should I not wait in the road? Who will see me? Charley will scold me, but I don't much mind that. If only he were here to do so —now! At this moment the sound of a quick stepping horse's feet falls on my ear.

"At last!" I cry aloud, for I know this is he, my husband.

Regardless of the descending groom and Charley's oft repeated remonstrances, I fling the gate back with a jerk, and run to Romeo's head, and stop him then and there, for I know now his master must descend, and will not be carried swiftly away from me up the broad sweep of gravel;

"Oh, how I have waited, Charley! How glad I am you have come at last!" As I

speak I lay my hand on his arm, and we stand together, he watching his man and horse trotting off to the stable together, I watching *him*—"my man," as they say in German. True enough, the only one man in the world—for me.

When Charley has seen his belongings safely turn the sharp corner into the yard, he remembers my undignified proceeding in anticipating the groom, and Charley tries to look cross. As if I should allow him to frown, now that at last he has come home! He has a way of pondering before he speaks, and now his thoughts are still halfway to that attractive stable, although the scolding for me is rising to his lips. I can mostly guess the drift of such coming remarks, and this occasionally gives me an advantage, of which I am not slow to avail myself. So now I prepare for the storm before it has time to break.

"You are just going to scold me, Charley," say I, laughing, "and I will not be scolded. It was very wicked of me to open the gate, I know, and I am awfully sorry, and beg you will forgive me, just this once. I know that is Lake's work; I know I am not a lodgekeeper, and not a groom, and— there, surely I have said it all for you, haven't I, dear? May I be let off without another reproachful word, please—please? Do you know it is really your fault, Charley?"— This I say intending to carry war into the enemy's camp.—"You were so late, and I so weary of waiting, or indeed I should not have shocked you by such demonstrative delight. What are you going to say to me now, something nice, something dear?"

By this time we are in the porch. Roses and honeysuckles are climbing about us, and, together with the evening shadows,

hide us so completely that even Charley does not object to the liberty I am taking in laying my hands on his shoulders and lifting my face for a kiss. He actually stoops to lay his papers and umbrella on the stone balustrade, and so frees the arm with which he draws me close to him, and whispers his dear words of greeting.

By-and-bye—dinner over—we sit out under the verandah. Charley is lazy, warm, tired. He is lounging in a low arm-chair, smoking contentedly, while I sit on a stool at his feet, resting my head against his knee. We are chatting placidly, and presently my husband says,

"Tell them to call me early, Fay, because I want to be off in time. No good to be done after one o'clock Saturday."

"You are not to go to town at all to-morrow," say I, coolly.

"Not to go to town, child!" he cries, amazed at my audacious assertion. As I do not explain, he adds, "What can you mean?"

"Mean? Just what I say, and this I will add, for your special information, you are not going out of our gate to-morrow without me."

Charley puffs clouds of smoke away in silence. He knows that his silence mostly provokes rapid speech from me. But on this occasion I do not rapidly declare the burden of my thoughts. So, after a lengthened pause, Charley resumes,

"What will the seniors say if you come to the office with me to-morrow?"

"Never mind what the seniors say, we shall not be there to hear. You are not going to the office at all."

"Will you condescend to explain your-

self, most enigmatical of British matrons?" he asks, laughing at my peremptory tone.

"Charley dear," I whisper, turning and looking straight up into his eyes, while something comes dimmingly into mine, "Have you quite forgotten?"

It is too dark for him to see me clearly, and he does not hear the tremble in my voice, so says, without the slightest sentiment in his tone,

"Forgotten? Forgotten what? No breakfast or croquet on to-morrow, is there?"

His right hand, with that soothing pipe in it, has fallen over the arm of the chair, his left is closely clasped in both mine. I am standing before him now, and the light from the lamp within the rooms falls full upon my face, but he has not looked into it

yet. In his quiet way he is pondering, and presently says,

"You are very much in earnest, and very mysterious, Fay! Upon my word, I cannot remember! Eh, what—tears?" He jumps up, forgetting even that precious pipe, which falls from his hand. He, too, can be earnest where I am concerned, and in my heart I bless him.

"Only glad tears, Charley; quite happy ones, that come with a certain remembrance —to-morrow will be the longest day!"

"True, my queen, and our—yes, of course, actually the third, and I have not even a present for the little woman. You might have reminded me, I think." He seems quite vexed at his forgetfulness, and I hasten to reassure him,

"What can I possibly want with presents, Charley, when I have you for my very

own? Sometimes I feel as if we were too happy, as if life were too bright, too delightful; and then I think such happiness cannot last. It is not good for women to be so perfectly content, and to have all their heart desires."

"Foolish child, what fancies!"

"Foolish, perhaps; but they are not fancies."

"Are you plotting any changes in this delicious honeymoon life of ours, wife?"

"God forbid. Have you never felt, Charley, that absolute happiness seems as though it could not last? We mortals are not able to hold it firmly. It is sure to slip from our grasp, be it never so tenacious, or to get stolen by some envious hand,"

"You strange little Fay! Perhaps all that sounds plausible enough, but do you know, I think, as long as it depends on you

and me, my dear, we shall manage to hold to our good fortune all the same. We seem to have nursed it pretty successfully for the last three years. Haven't we?"

There is no need for further speech. We understand one another. After a while Charley lifts up the neglected pipe.

"Shall I tell them to call you early, dear, as you wish to be in the office in good time?" I ask, for which polite inquiry I get a correcting tap on the shoulder.

"No, no, wife," he says; "you were right, as usual. No business for me to-morrow, but a real holiday. What shall we do with it?"

* * * *

Can the glad sun shine upon a happier woman than I am on the morning of this twenty-first of June? That is the thought in my mind as I stand at the top of the

stone steps that lead from our breakfast-room down into the garden and shrubbery. I have looped up my dainty white skirts preparatory to the morning stroll with my husband, who awaits me below. He is tying up a bunch of roses he has just gathered, and as I come down he offers them to me. A glorious posy! Crimson roses, creamy roses, pink roses, yellow roses, and a hanging cluster of fragile lint-white ones. Dewdrops still sparkle upon them, and they catch and brilliantly reflect the slanting sunbeams that glance at them through the waving leaves of the overhanging trees. Oh! those dewy roses! How their fragrance lingers and brings each of those glad hours back to me! Just as vividly as does the sight and scent of myrtle and orange-blossom recall that former "longest day" when before God I vowed

to love, honour, and obey my husband. That task is so easy—indeed, it seems so impossible to do otherwise, that I often wonder why I felt so very solemn when first I undertook my wifely duties. My thoughts travel back to that day as I bury my face in the dewy freshness of those roses Charley has gathered for me, and which he has just put into my hands. . . .

We walk on to the stables together, and I produce carrots and sugar for the horses, for which they turn eager heads, and give their pretty thanks with playful pawings and distended nostrils. Then I turn to Lake, the groom, and inquire after his wife and little one. To the latter I send a cake. All this refreshment for man and beast comes forth from my inexhaustible pocket, to reach the lowest depth of which my arm has to plunge in up to the elbow. Seeing this,

Charley laughs at me. I resent his laughter, and while Lake turns away, pinch the master, who roars and causes Miss Juliet to lash out in sudden excitement. Lake is a very discreet young man, and swiftly disappears into the harness-room. We two, certainly in our innocent happiness more like school children than "married and settled and all," continue our absurd fight for a moment, and then, peace being restored, I ask,

"Have you decided on the colour for your new dogcart, Charley?"

"The 'missis' said dark green, I thought, so of course dark green it will be. Does not the missis always have her own way?"

"No, emphatically no? Who ordered Miss Juliet's lovely tail to be cut short in the mistress's absence?"

"My dear Fay! She did not match Romeo!"

"But what about Romeo? Did not the mistress admire——"

"Oh! there's no accounting for women's tastes."

"No, or for the want of it! To think now of my absolutely admiring *you!*" I try to say this deprecatingly, but as I look up into his handsome face, I cannot hide the pleasure I have in so looking. And he knows it all! Would it really be better for both of us if I showed him less openly the admiring love in my heart? People have told me warningly that I am spoiling him. If that is so, he spoils me too, for I do just whatever I please under his approving eyes. And could any two people get on better than we two do? I defy them.

We have settled to spend our holiday at

the Crystal Palace. We are in the land of Cockneys, though we have a pretty garden, a verandah, a bit of paddock, and a roomy stable. Our house is in Wimbledon, and we can look away over the common to the Surrey hills. When the Volunteers come camping out, we wish they did not raise such terrible clouds of dust, but we find them pleasant company for all that, and are glad of their invitations, and think it fine fun to have our dinner out of tin pannikins, to sit on the down-trodden grass, to listen to stories and songs, to join in choruses, and fancy ourselves "camping out" too.

We have two or three special friends among the Regulars too, and when they come to us Charley tries to prevent me from talking about the Volunteers. Of course, I talk the more; I am proud of the Irregulars, and glory in saying so, and don't mind how

bored Captain Hector looks, and force him into many a wordy battle. Need I say that by dint of patience, perseverance, and inexhaustible argument, I—weak woman—always carry the day against the silent, undemonstrative Guardsman? And shall I tell how, truce declared, I generously prepare the claret cup he loves, and so willingly takes from his hostess's hands?

END OF VOL. I.

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